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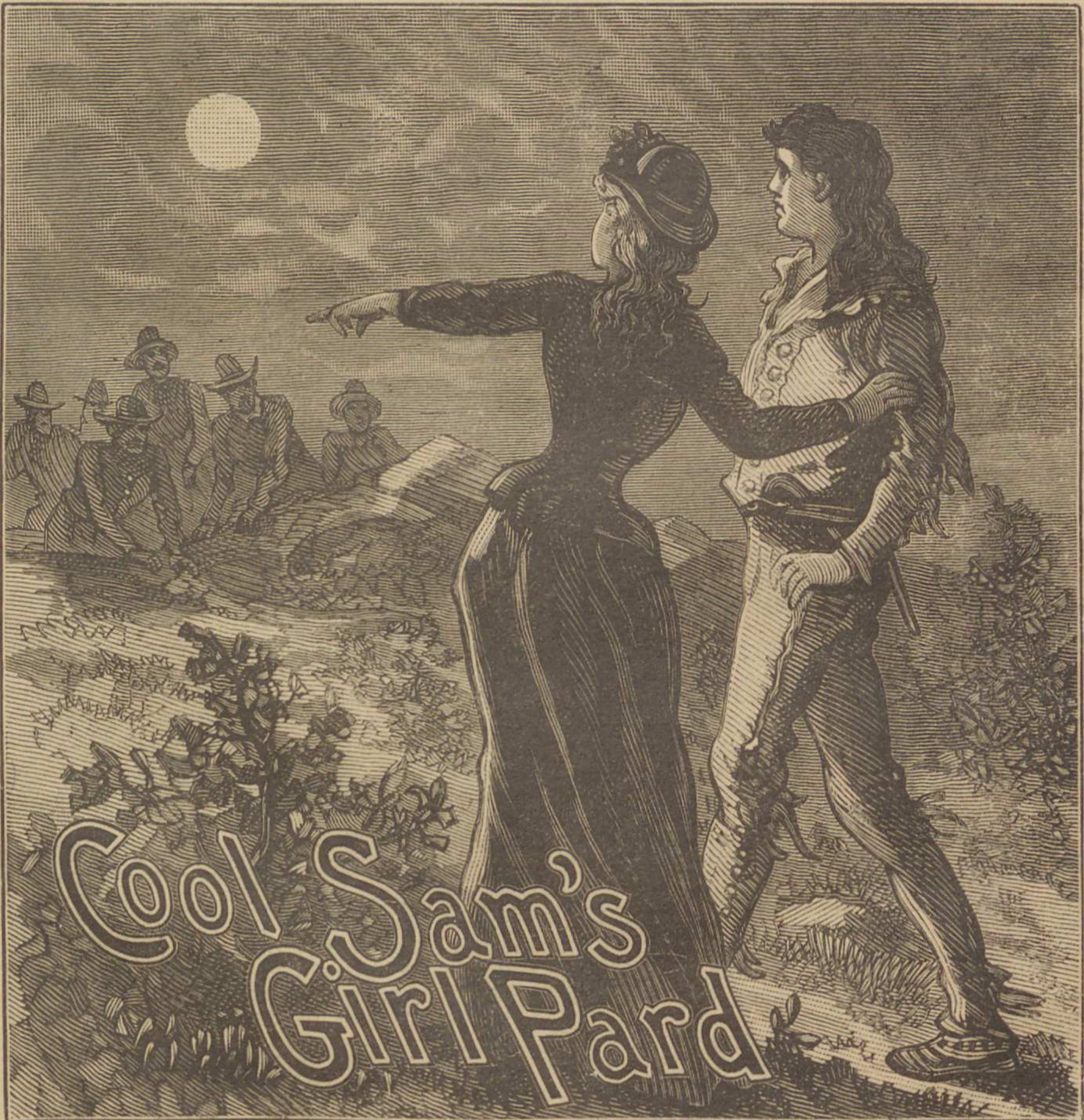
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"HARK!" SAID THE GIRL, AND HER HAND CLUTCHED THE BOY'S ARM. "WHAT ARE
THOSE CREEPING FIGURES YONDER?"

Cool Sam's Girl Pard;

OR,

Captain Dick and His Texans.

BY T. C. HARBAUGH,

AUTHOR OF "THE TEN PARDS," "OLD ECLIPSE,"
"BILL BRAVO," "ARKANSAS," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

MEETING THEIR MATCH.

A SUN which had scorched the scanty vegetation of the famous Staked Plains was sinking slowly in the west when six men, well mounted and armed to the teeth entered a rather wild-looking pass among the hills a few miles west of the *Llanos*.

Desperate fellows they were judging from their aspect—wild Texans who know how to handle the deadly weapons of the border, including the lariat which each carried coiled like a serpent at his saddle-bow.

The six might have been taken for members of one family; they were alike in build—stalwart, broad-chested—athletes all.

Their skins were swarthy like those of miners and desperadoes of the Southwest border; their eyes were black and penetrating, and all had long hair and raven mustaches *à la banditti*.

They wore suits of close-fitting buckskin which were to some extent, ornamented with fringe, and their feet and calves were incased in the usual high-topped boots.

Known were they everywhere as the Six Terrible Texans, men who had carried their lives in their hands on many a mad foray into Apache-land, and who had shot their way through crowds of people whose skins were whiter than their own.

Two and two they dashed into the pass, on the evening which opens our story, and, having ridden through it, they drew rein just beyond its confines.

"Mebbe we'd better post 'em hyar," said one, pointing to a huge boulder a few feet away. "Thet stone offers a conspicuous place. It's cracked in several places, an' pegs will hold the paper in its place."

"Suit yerself, Dick; ye'r cap'n," was the indifferent response.

The man who had first spoken slid to the ground, and approached the boulder with a paper in his hand, which he had just drawn from beneath his jacket.

Three strides, such as an eager man would take, carried him to the stone, and the next moment he was stooping in front of it.

"Hello! what does this mean?" he suddenly cried, recoiling as he spoke, but with his eyes riveted on the stone.

The exclamations were enough to send the rest of the gang from their saddles, and a minute later they were peering over the captain's shoulder with eyes burning with eager curiosity.

"Read that—them words on the stone!" cried the bronzed Texan, whose finger almost touched the dark surface of the boulder. "Somebody's

ahead ov us. Woe to ther hand what cut them letters in this stone!"

In less time than it has taken us to describe the scene, every Texan had mastered the inscription on the rock, the work of steady nerves and a piece of good steel:

"OCTOBER 10.

"Bound ter find the Infant. Look out, reds! Keep off, you six louts from Texas.

"COOL SAM AN' PARD."

"A challenge an' an insult!" exclaimed one of the six. "October the tenth. When was that?"

"It's now—to-day!"

The Terrible Six sprung erect, as if the last words had been spoken by the man who had traced the letters in the stone.

"To-day, it is, by George! We may not be two hours behind Cool Sam an' his pard. Who ar' they?"

"What matters it who they ar'? Thet last sentence is enough: 'Keep off, you six louts from Texas!' Them words sets my blood on fire. The pards dare us. Two ag'in' six! It ain't a breakfast spell. Cool Sam's a fool, fer no sensible man would write thet last line whar we'd be likely ter see it!"

The mad Texan turned and strode toward his horse.

"I'd like ter know who he means by ther Infant, but we'll find out," he continued, in semi-audible tones. "We didn't cross ther *Llanos* ter fight white men exactly, but we allus is ready fer anything thet offers. Cool Sam, eh? It'll be Cold Sam when we git through with him. What's ther cap'n doin'?"

The captain of the Six had drawn his bowie and was tracing a word in the soft surface of the stone directly under the signature already there.

He was not a good sculptor, but when he rose from his task, the two words he left there were quite distinct.

The signature now read:

"COOL SAM AN' PARD—TWO FOOLS."

Several coarse laughs rewarded Captain Dick for his pains; and sheathing his bowie, he led his companions to their horses, which all mounted at the same moment.

"It's a mystery, but we'll git to the heart ov it if we hev ter cut our way thar," avowed the leader of the Six. "I never heard ov Cool Sam an' pard afore; but they've insulted the Terrible Six, an' that's enough. Boys, this may not be an Apache-hunt, arter all. First, we'll find Cool Sam, his pard, an' ther Infant."

With a parting look at the stone, the Texans touched their horses lightly with the spurs, and dashed from the spot.

They looked like the bandits of old romance as they rode swiftly over the well-discerned trail, which led almost straight ahead in a westerly direction, toward Fort Stanton, a Government post on the confines of Apache-land.

Suddenly the Six came in sight of a number of lights which looked like fire-flies of the night, and Captain Dick, with a glance over his broad shoulder at the dare-devils who rode behind him, said but one word:

"Bed-Rock!"

Yes, the Terrible Six were about to enter a new Mexican town at the foot of a range of pre-tentious mountains.

San Topeto, the Mexicans called the place, which boasted of seven hundred people and a wall which had been built years ago as a protection against the raids of the fierce Apache; but the desperate Americans who had drifted to the place to get gold by means fair or foul, and christened it Bed-Rock, a name by which it was almost universally known.

Captain Dick and his Texans had been there before.

There were people in the little adobe houses in Bed-Rock who trembled at the sounds of their horses' hoofs, and men who longed to hear of the death of the men from the Lone Star State.

All at once into Bed-Rock dashed the Terrible Six, the clatter of their steeds' hoofs awakening the echoes of the mongrel town, and exclamations of terrible fright, principally from women's lips, announced their arrival everywhere.

Bed-Rock swarmed with life in a moment, and the Texans drew rein in the main square in the center of a conglomerate crowd whose looks were that many questions.

"Come hyer, Carlo," said Captain Dick, catching sight of a brawny Mexican who had the eyes of a serpent in his little head, and as Carlo reached the horse the Texan leaned toward him.

"Have you any new people in Bed-Rock?" he asked.

Instantly the Mexican's countenance changed; his eyes fairly glittered, so that if he had said no, Captain Dick would have clapped a revolver to his forehead and called him a liar.

"We have two, Senor Dick," was the reply.

"Whar ar' they?"

"At the hotel."

"What do they look like?"

"One's a man, senor, not older than you be, an' the other's a girl."

Captain Dick's eyes dilated, and he almost straightened in his saddle.

"A girl? Then they can't be—"

"The man calls himself Cool Sam," interrupted Carlo.

"Gods! They're the pair, for all!"

The crowd made a path for the six when, a moment afterward, Captain Dick was seen to lift the rein and send a swift mad glance across the square to where the story-and-a-half hotel stood, the building designated as the quarters of Cool Sam and his pard.

Of course the Texans followed their leader, and the crowd swarmed after the last horseman.

"Cap'n," said Carlo, who kept alongside the leader's horse, "mebbe you'd better not disturb ther pair to-night. The girl's asleep, an' Cool Sam—"

"I run this boat!" grated Captain Dick, giving Carlo a look that immediately silenced him. "Hyer we ar' at ther door ov ther hotel. We'll inspect the twin photographs anyway."

He slid from his horse with the last sentence, and strode toward the porch, which extended

the whole length of the front of the New Mexican hostelry.

"Whar does Cool Sam sleep, Carlo?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Thar he is now, senor!"

At this announcement there appeared on the porch leaning coolly against one of the columns that supported it, a man at sight of whom Captain Dick instantly halted, and his Texans cocked their revolvers.

Nearly six feet in height, rather slenderly built, with black eyes and hair, a clean-shaven face, and a well-proportioned body, arrayed in dark clothes.

This was Cool Sam.

He had glided from the house without the least noise, and some of the Texans were almost willing to swear that he had risen through the planks of the porch.

The moon above Bed-Rock shone benignly on the scene; the soft light showed Cool Sam plainly to the Texans and the crowd.

"We're ther six louts from Texas!" suddenly flashed Captain Dick with a tiger in each eye.

A faint smile appeared at the corners of Cool Sam's mouth.

"So I see," he said quietly, and in a manner that took the Terrible Six aback.

"That war an insult. We ar' Texas gentlemen. No man shall call us louts an' live!"

"Thet's plain. Gentlemen from Texas, I've heard ov you afore."

"So hev others! Ye'r' hyer on bizness, you an' yer pard, the stone said," Captain Dick went on, biting his lips, maddened by the imperturbable coolness of the man before him.

"Yer pard's a girl, I hear. We ar' defenders of female innocence—"

"You ar'?" and Cool Sam's eyes twinkled.

"I'll sleep over thet last remark. Good-night, gentlemen from Texas!" and the speaker began to withdraw.

"Halt!" suddenly bawled Captain Dick. "You stand before the Terrible Six. Trot out yer pard an' exhibit her to us. By Heaven! you've got ter swallow yer words written on the stone. We ar' six tigers from Tartarus!"

"The babe's asleep."

"No difference! Trot 'er out!"

Instead of moving off Cool Sam came forward until he reached the edge of the porch.

"My pard's asleep, I say, an' sha'n't be waked. Gentlemen from Texas, if you want anything out ov me, I'm yer man!"

With the last word the long arms of Cool Sam moved forward, and the Terrible Six saw at the end of each a cocked revolver behind which were the wicked eyes of their owner.

"I never go back on a pistol picnic," assured Cool Sam. "Men ov Texas, take yer choice. Die whar ye ar', ef ye try to waken my little pard!"

CHAPTER II.

TRYING TO GET EVEN.

COOL SAM had thrust his revolvers straight into the faces of the Terrible Six from Texas.

His long arms did not quaver; he held the deadly weapons with steady nerves.

Startled by Cool Sam's sudden display, the

Six looked from the revolvers to the eyes of their owner.

The spectators drew back in the moonlight and held their breath.

It was, taken all in all, one of the most thrilling tableaux Bed-Rock had witnessed for many days.

"Speak!" continued Cool Sam, breaking the silence. "Do you still insist on rousin' my little pard? I'm an accommodatin' ha'r-pin. I don't expect ter sail ter my journey's end on flow'ry beds ov ease. Thet's why I fetched my drop-pers along. Make up yer mind, Cap'n Dick. Shall it be war er peace?"

"Peace for ther present," growled the bronzed captain of the Six, and he seemed to hate himself for the utterance.

"Jes' ez you say, not that I care," retorted the cool man, and the crowd noticed that the revolvers were not lowered an inch. "It's a draw game, eh, gentlemen?"

Sullenly, but with eyes that flashed under his black brows, Captain Dick went back to his horse, and with a quick, significant glance at Carlo, sprung to saddle without touching the heavy stirrup.

"Follow me," he said to the Mexican, and wheeling his horse, he turned his back to the stranger, who had not moved an inch since lifting the revolvers.

More than one man in the crowd looked disappointed.

It was evident that the Terrible Six had few friends among the number, and Captain Dick's refusal to press the demand had given the half-dozen a new lease of life.

"Run ag'in' a snag, senor?" suggested Carlo, looking up into the face of the leader of the Texans, when the whole party had drawn rein in the shadow of the old Apache wall west of Bed-Rock. "Thet's a cool rooster you've left behind."

"Cool as a cucumber, Carlo," assented Captain Dick. "Whar on earth did he spring from?"

"Don't know, senor."

"Is his pard a young girl?"

"About sixteen."

"Jehosaphat! almost a woman. Pretty, Carlo?"

"Pretty as a picture," and the Mexican showed his teeth in a grin.

"When did they strike Bed-Rock?"

"Just before sundown."

"On hossback?"

"Si, senor."

"War the girl armed?"

"She carried a rifle. I saw no more."

"What did they say when they came?"

"Nothin'. Went straight to the hotel."

"An' hev'n't left it since?"

"Been thar all the time."

"What room have they?"

"Did Senor Dick notice the little window just above the porch?"

"Yes."

"They are in that room, senor."

"Do you hear that, pards?" asked Captain Dick, turning to his men who had drank in all Carlo's answers. "We don't leave Bed-Rock till we've got even with Cool Sam and his pard."

The fellow had the drop on us awhile ago, an' hang me, ef a word, ther liftin' ov a hand on our part, wouldn't hev opened both of them magazines he held in his hands. Cool? Cool ez a cucumber; but we kin make 'im a shade cooler. Texans, shall the man from every-whar bluff us thet way?"

The unanimity of the reply startled Carlo.

"No!" spoken by each Texan was the prompt response.

"Go back an' see how the land lays, Carlo," ordered Captain Dick. "We'll gallop off behind the clump of mesquite. Make the people ov Bed-Rock b'lieve thet fer once a pair ov pistols hev drove the Terrible Six away. Hang around the hotel. Let thet cool shooter go to sleep whar his pard is. Bed-Rock is a virtuous town, an' keeps early hours, all but the monte-players. We'll not disturb them when we come back."

Carlo looked somewhat amazed over Captain Dick's last sentence.

"Yes!" emphatically, "we're goin' back—we ther louts ov Texas," continued Dick. "Cool Sam hez r'iled us to ther bone. He's come to ther wrong kentry ter find the Infant he speaks of, an' ter buck ag'in' the Six from Texas. We'll be back to-night—when the moon is yonder," and Captain Dick pointed to a certain part of the heavens. "You'll know us when we come, Carlo. Cool to-night; cold to-morrer!"

The wave of a bronzed hand dismissed Carlo, but a few feet from the wall he stopped and watched the six horsemen ride away.

"The white senorita is beautiful," he said to himself. "She made Carlo's heart beat when he saw her. Carlo cannot take her from Senor Sam, but the Six fighters can. Carlo will go back an' watch for them."

The Mexican went back into the town where he found the excitement considerably abated.

The monte and mescal dens were already filling up and the women and children, confident that the pistols of Cool Sam had driven the Six from Bed-Rock, had gone home satisfied and without fear.

The wily Mexican took care to encounter several acquaintances, to each of whom he declared that the Terrible Six had left on a horse-stealing expedition among the distant villages of the Apaches, and he always added, to clinch this plausible lie, that on their return, several weeks later, they would call Cool Sam to account, if he accommodated them by remaining in town.

Then, in order to fully carry out Captain Dick's wishes, he lighted a poor cheroot and sauntered across the porch of Bed-Rock's one hotel, into the building itself.

Having crossed the threshold, he entered a room redolent with the fumes of tobacco and occupied by five or six men who were having a game of Mexican monte.

More than once the sallow spy glanced wistfully at the narrow stair-door that led the way to the little room occupied by Cool Sam and his companion.

He longed to climb the steps and feast his eyes on the beauty of the cool man's pard which had already roused his passions.

He leaned beside the well-smoked wall beside

the door, and watched it more than he did the gamblers.

Once or twice unperceived by the monte devotees, he tried the door with his fingers, but as they could get no purchase it did not move.

All at once he abandoned his post and left the house.

Crossing the porch again, he kept in the shadow of the resort until he reached one of the many trees that occupied the plaza or square.

There he crouched against the trunk and fixed his eyes on the little window above the roof of the porch.

"Now, let midnight come," he muttered. "Carlo is on the watch."

The moon neared the part of the sky indicated by Captain Dick.

To all outward appearances, Bed-Rock was buried in slumber, but behind certain doors scores of dark-faced men, Mexicans and Americans, won and lost over greasy cloths with greasy cards, and cheated and lied with revolvers cocked in their belts.

Carlo would have given his fortune, which was not great, to have been permitted to look beyond the sill of the little window he ceaselessly watched.

If he had not looked into the deep, black eyes of Cool Sam a few hours before, he might have attempted to reach the window by a crawl across the roof; but those eyes had spoken volumes of determination and death.

"Moon about right now," said the Greaser spy at last. "Will Senor Dick an' his tigers come?"

At that moment the shadow of a man fell against the old Apache wall, then another and another until six had darkened it.

Captain Dick and his men!

"We'll find thet Greaser ov a Carlo first, whispered the captain of the gang. "Cool Sam, you've waked up ther wrong men. We'll kiss thet gal-pard ov yer's over yer cold carkiss!"

Forward toward the square where crouched under the tree, and waiting for them, was Carlo, the Mexican.

Suddenly in the shade of another tree the six crawlers halted, and a moment later Captain Dick moved on.

Carlo heard him coming, and waited for him with a pleased smile.

"Now fer ther cool wedge thet's come ter Bed-Rock!" grated Captain Dick, through clinched teeth. "He's still thar, Carlo?"

"Still thar, cap'n. What's yer plan?"

"We're goin' ter creep t'ier roof an' git ther drop on 'im."

"In a dark room?"

"Never mind. We've got ther hull thing down to an item. Git away? He can't, Carlo. When did the Terrible Six fail on their man?"

Carlo did not know.

At one end of the porch grew a tree whose branches rose above the roof now in shadow.

Fifteen minutes after Captain Dick's question four human figures crept across the roof, while on the ground below, with cocked Winchesters leveled at the one little window, stood two stalwart men in border buckskin.

The crawl of the four was noiseless and cat-like.

Need we name the leader, he whose hand held a huge revolver, and whose eyes had the glitter of a cobra's?

"They've got Cool Sam this time," murmured Carlo. "The terrible Americans will pay him back for pokin' his revolvers into their faces to-night."

Carlo continued to watch the objects that neared Cool Sam's window.

"They have him, the cool senor!" he suddenly exclaimed.

At that moment the foremost Texan reached the window; his hand touched the sill.

The next moment Carlo, the Greaser spy, sprung up from the foot of the tree.

"*Sacrista!*" he cried. "The fox is awake!"

The window had tumbled out with a crash, as if struck with a hammer by some madman on the inside!

The men on the roof leaped up amid a shower of flying glass.

"Gentlemen from Texas, Cool Sam of Cold Spring is always on hand when it's his interest ter be thar!" said a stern voice, and the two revolvers that were thrust into the faces of the Texans emphasized in a terrible manner the words of the speaker.

The two rangers nearest the foot of the roof rolled off and struck the ground under the very rifles of their comrades; but Captain Dick was forced to keep his position five feet from the window, covered by one of Cool Sam's revolvers.

"I am Cool Sam from Cold Spring!" ejaculated the man on the inside. "You'll hev ter try a deeper game than this, Cap'n Dick. What did I call you fellers on the stone?—louts from Texas, eh? I guess I'll stand by ther epithet."

What reply the discomfited Texan was about to make when the scene suddenly changed, will never be known.

All at once the air was filled with the wild shrieks of women and children.

"The Apache! the Apache!"

At any time the announcement of the coming of these terrible red marauders of the Southwest border is enough to strike terror to the hearts of the bravest; but for a town like Bed-Rock to be charged in the night by them doubles the horror and confusion.

The cry of "the Apache!" was answered by a chorus of such yells that left no doubt of the correctness of the announcement.

Carlo sprung from the shadow of the tree; he saw the doors of a dozen monte dens fly open, and scores of men rushed into the square.

"We all hate the Apache, Cap'n Dick," said Cool Sam looking down into the face of the Texan. "Therefor' we'll fight him first. Arter thet, I'm at yer service."

An instant later down the street from the north came the red fiends yelling like devils incarnate.

CHAPTER III.

THE PARD'S FLIGHT.

THE wild yells increased in ferocity as the charging Apaches neared the plaza.

"Arter ther battle, not now," continued Cool Sam, addressing the Texans still on the roof of

the porch. "Ther common enemy has struck Bed-Rock. It mightn't be healthy for you ter remain whar you ar'." And the menacing revolvers were lowered, and Cool Sam vanished from sight.

At the same moment the head of the charging column struck the plaza on the north side.

Captain Dick and his remaining companions leaped from the roof and took up their station on the porch with cocked revolvers and ready Winchesters.

The cries of the women and children were hushed now as if the appalling danger had choked them into silence.

Suddenly a herd of wild horses with flowing manes and tails dashed across the plaza.

Not an Indian was to be seen, but all knew that the red-skins had placed the bodies of their steeds between their own and the deadly weapons of the men of Bed-Rock.

"Shoot the hosses!" suddenly roared the voice of Captain Dick, and the rifles and revolvers of the gamblers instantly replied.

The Indian steeds reared and plunged under the shots sent into them with more than border vengeance; but the red whirlwind passed on.

For three minutes the yells of the Apaches were drowned by the incessant firing of the men of Bed-Rock.

When the wild cavalry had passed a dozen horses lay dead, or were struggling in agony on the square, but not an Indian was to be seen.

The human cyclone had passed on, and the red riders had forced their steeds to leap the ruins of the old Apache wall of the southern confines of the town, and were drawing rein some distance from the scene of their exciting exploit.

The Six Texans looked into each other's faces after the Apaches had passed and showed signs of astonishment.

"A genuine red cyclone an' nobody hurt," said Captain Dick. "Out thar lie a dozen tip-top hosses, but the reds all got away. It beats me. Five years ago they did ther same thing in Bed-Rock, but they didn't git off so easily then. We got wind of their comin' an' stretched a rope across ther squar'. It tumbled ther hosses all in a heap, an' we sailed into them with destruction. It war a picnic fer Bed-Rock, entirely different from ther one had to-night. Twelve hosses an' not a red! I don't understand it. Three times I caught sight of a head, an' fired straight at the target."

Pistol in hand the men of Bed-Rock stood around the fallen horses and discussed the wild dash of the Apaches and its outcome.

"When the excitement has settled a little we'll go back ter Cool Sam an' pard," said the captain of the Six to several of his followers. "The Injuns took a hand in ther game, an' forced us to throw up fer the present. Whar is the cool 'un?"

"Whar we left 'im, likely. I saw six flashes in his window as the reds charged down the streets."

"Then he's thar yet. I'll go an' see."

"Not alone, cap'n."

"Alone!" and Captain Dick shook off the hand that closed on his arm, and strode toward the hotel.

"You an' Cap'n Dick fer it, Cool Sam," he grated fiercely under his breath. "Ef Bed-Rock war 'Frisco, it would be too small for both of us."

But he was not allowed to get more than twenty paces from his companion ere a loud, clear voice from the southern suburbs of the town startled everybody.

"Listen!" said forty men, as Captain Dick halted. "Thar goes some Injun lingo."

"Let the white and yellow faces of San Topeto listen to the words of Gold Belt, the war-chief of the Apaches," said the voice.

"Drive ahead!" howled a giant desperado, who, armed to the teeth and swarthy as a Moor, looked the cut-throat that he was.

"The Apaches sought to kill no one to-night," continued the unseen speaker. "They rode through San Topeto because it stood in their way. The time is coming when Gold Belt, at the head of all his warriors, will visit the town, with knife and arrow. He remembers how, many moons ago, the San Topetans roped his braves and slaughtered them like wolves in a pen."

"Bet yer life we did!" ejaculated the border Hercules.

"Silence!" commanded Captain Dick. "Let the Injun finish his talk."

"Injun?" was the echo. "We know, ef you don't, Cap'n Dick from Texas, thet thet feller's face ar' whiter than yours."

There was a start on Captain Dick's part, but he did not reply, for the clear voice was speaking again:

"The San Topetans have not spared the Apaches, and the Apaches will not spare them! When the moon dies they will come like the storm that uproots trees in the forest and shakes the waters in the bed of the Rio Grande! They will leave nothing of the town of the white and yellow men. Gold Belt has taken his oath, and all his braves have sworn over his lasso. Let the San Topetans prepare for the storm that shall strike them in the dark!"

"Thet's Injun bluster!" cried the stalwart man. "Whar is the San Topetan what shakes in his boots because ov thet boy's threats? He talks fer Gold Belt, the meanest Injun west ov Texas, but what ov it? Let 'em come when the nights get dark ag'in. Cyclone Taos will lead the San Topetans when they want a leader. No boy, though he talks fer Gold Belt, shall bluff this land alligator!"

"A boy, did you say?"

The leader of the Terrible Six turned at the voice in which the question was put, and to his astonishment found himself but four feet from Cool Sam, whose eyes, full of eagerness, were fixed intently on Cyclone Taos.

"Yes, sir; a boy, an' not much bigger than yer daisy pard," answered the bronzed giant. "Thar isn't a drop ov Injun blood in his veins, yet he's an Apache, to all intents and purposes. Seen him? Yes, I've seen the youngster, but ten feet off you'd take 'im fer a red when he's got his Injun riggin' on."

"Not older than my pard?" said Cool Sam, musingly, yet speaking aloud.

"Thar's not much difference between the two. They made him a chief two years ago, an' he

hates us with all ther hatred ov the full-blooded Apache."

Before Cool Sam replied, Captain Dick touched the sleeve of his nearest Texan."

"Keep 'im hyer fer ten minutes," he said, sending a swift glance toward Cool Sam. "Keep 'im interested in thet young white chief," and away he glided toward the hotel.

"I'll interview Cool Sam's pard," he said to himself. "Things ain't turnin' out so bad after all. Mebbe when Cool Sam comes back he'll find the nest empty."

A few strides carried him to the hotel.

The place seemed entirely deserted, for the entire population of San Topeta filled the plaza.

He crossed the porch and entered the reception and gambling-room, where the tallow-dips threw a weird light over the cards that had dropped from the hands of the players at the first Apache yell.

He saw all this at a glance, and the stair-door also.

"Now fer the inspection, daisy pard," fell from his lips as he opened the door and cat-like crept up the darkened stair.

There was a cocked revolver in the Texan's right hand, and intense eagerness in his black eyes.

It did not take him a minute to reach the last step, and his keen eye showed him the little room and its scanty furniture—two couches and the same number of three-legged stools.

As Captain Dick started across the chamber a figure rose before him, and "Halt!" was spoken in stern tones.

The Texan, with an ejaculation of amazement, drew back, half-lifting his revolver.

The voice that had spoken was a man's, not a girl's, and the figure before him was clad in buckskin; it was the figure of a man as large as himself!

Had Carlo and the rest lied?

Was Cool Sam's pard a man, and not the beautiful young creature several times described by those who professed to have seen her?

"Who ar' you?" followed up the "halt" which had startled Captain Dick. "If Cool Sam, you won't find yer pard hyer."

Then it was that Captain Dick recognized the speaker by his voice.

"It is I—Cap'n Dick," he said.

Instantly the revolver by which he had been covered dropped at its possessor's side, and a stride brought the two men together.

"Carlo!" cried Captain Dick. "What brought you hyar!"

"What but the girl," grinned the Mexican.

"Senor Cap'n, we are too late!"

"Is she really gone, Carlo?"

"Gone! See hyar! she left paper on table for Cool Sam to read. Moon no shine bright enough for Carlo to read paper. Girl gone, though."

The Texan snatched a piece of paper from Carlo's hand and drew a lucifer across the rough wall.

"Hyar, hold the match while I read," he said, and Carlo took the improvised candle while Captain Dick's dark hands began to unfold the dirty paper.

"What does girl say?" asked the breathless

Mexican, showing his swarthy face over one of the Texan's broad shoulders.

"Nothin', more than she's gone—given Cool Sam the slip; abandoned him in the worst town he ever struck."

"Senor Dick read what girl say. Carlo anxious to know whar she go to."

"No doubt ov thet," snapped Captain Dick, crunching the message in his hand. "See hyar, Carlo. You came hyar fer no good purpose. What bizness hez a Greaser like yerself with a girl as pretty as they say Cool Sam's pard is? After this when you find a woman's letter keep it to yerself. Above all, never let it fall inter the clutches ov ther cap'n ov ther Terrible Six."

A response like the growl of a baffled cougar issued from between the Mexican's lips.

With a Spanish oath he flung the match to the floor and clapped his broad foot upon it just as it struck the plank.

"Cap'n Dick no keep letter then!" he grated.

"Thar's whar you fool yerself!" was the quick retort, and the hand that leaped at Carlo's throat knocked aside the revolver which had shot upward from his side. Thar's six ov us, Carlo, my yaller daisy; but Cap'n Dick is ther worse tiger ov ther bunch. Sha'n't keep ther letter, eh? I'll show you, fool! I hev'n't closed on a yaller throat for six months; but I hev'n't lost my grip! Want Cool Sam's pard, eh? Wal, git her—ef ye kin!"

The evil eyes of the Mexican were starting from his head under the pressure of Captain Dick's grip; he would have fallen senseless at his torturer's feet if he had been released.

"I'll sarcumvent Cool Sam myself, an' make his pard *my* pard!" he hissed. "I'll find out who the Infant is they're arter, an' ef he stands in my road I'll finish him, too. I'm more devil than man; that's what made me cap'n ov the Terrible Six from Texas."

He threw Carlo from him with the last sentence, and the choked man fell across one of the stools without a groan.

"So much for you!" exclaimed Captain Dick, following the reeling Mexican with a glance. "So the girl hes gone to the boy chief ov the Apaches? What's got in ter her head, ennyhow? Cool Sam, you'd better hev kept yer quarters."

He turned to the stairway as he finished and went down.

As he entered the deserted room on the floor below, a man stepped in from the porch.

"Cool Sam?" said Captain Dick.

For a single second the two men stood face to face, and then the captain of the Six leaped at the cool man's throat.

"You an' me fer it, Cool Sam!" he cried.

But there was no collision, for somehow or other the enraged Texan missed his man, and a moment later was picking himself up beyond the porch!

CHAPTER IV.

THE GIRL PARD'S MISSION.

COOL SAM had come back from the scene of excitement in the square, too late to detain his beautiful pard, and too late, also, to interfere in the terrible choking received by Carlo at the merciless hand of Captain Dick.

If he had not left the little room above the porch, he might have prevented the girl's departure, but, as it was, she was gone.

He had but to leave Captain Dick to pick himself up at his leisure to go up-stairs and find a senseless man stretched at full length across one of the cots, and the sole occupant of the apartment.

If he had arrived a few minutes sooner, he and not Carlo would have found the note left behind; but now the message was in Captain Dick's clutches, and he was left in the dark concerning the girl's whereabouts.

His fair pard had not only deserted Cool Sam, but she had followed the Apaches from the town.

If Cool Sam could have penetrated distance with his keen eyes at that moment, he would have seen a horse galloping over the low plain that stretched southward with scarce a tree to break the monotony, and he would have noticed, too, that the rider of that steed was a young girl whom he would have called Reta, probably at the top of his voice.

With the daring and grace of a queen of the arena, the young creature occupied the saddle that fitted the back of the mettled horse which bore her swiftly along, and ever and anon her voice was heard urging the steed to still greater exertions.

What was taking Cool Sam's Girl Pard over the trail recently made by the bloodthirsty Apaches who had just charged San Topedo with the impetuosity of a legion of devils?

"It was *his* will. I know it. On, on!" the girl said to her horse. "Heaven forgive me for deserting Cool Sam, my faithful friend, but I could not keep away. He will read my letter and know all. Ah! if those terrible Texans had not come!"

The steed seemed to know the need that made his young mistress urge him on.

The Apaches had had a good start, but the girl did not despair of overtaking them.

Probably she counted much on the freshness of her steed, while those of the Apaches must be pretty well blown.

"We heard in Texas that the Apaches had a boy chief, and I told my friend that it might be *he*, but Cool Sam said that he could not hate the whites deep enough to wear Indian feathers and he even laughed to think that the Apaches would spare a white babe's life and make him chief. I know now that they have done so. The voice I heard to-night was the voice of the boy chief of the Apaches."

If the horse that carried the girl showed signs of fatigue, she did not.

The spurs on her dainty feet urged him on, and her golden hair blew out from under her cap and waved in the wind like pennons of gold, as she kept the steed on the Apache trail.

She thought of Cool Sam more than once, of his astonishment when he should find the message left behind, of his next meeting with Captain Dick and his Texan Terrors but she did not turn back.

Five miles from San Topeto she drew rein on the summit of a little knoll, from which in the daytime one can see a sweep of grand country.

The horse was glad to stop.

"I have come up with them at last!" she suddenly exclaimed. "The Apache horde has halted. I will soon stand face to face with the boy chief."

After a brief rest she urged her steed into the little valley that stretched southward from the foot of the hill.

The moon had gone down now, but the brilliant stars in multitudes studded the sky.

Her quick ears had caught certain sounds that floated hither and thither on the wind.

"The hunt of a lifetime shall end to-night," she said. "The boy chief of the Apaches and Roy Robsart are one and the same. Cool Sam has sworn to help me find him, for the oath of our parents taken when we were babes in our cradles shall be kept. He has forgotten it, Roy has, but I will convince him. The mark on my arm has a mate on one of his. I will rob the Apache nation of a chief, but I will give back to civilization a hero."

At the foot of the hill the young girl stopped for a moment, and then slipped noiselessly to the ground.

Taking the bridle in her left hand, she glided forward leading the horse, and on the lookout for the Indian encampment.

All at once she halted again, and then laid her hand on a revolver that showed itself above her belt.

"Stand!" she said in stern tones to the figure that rose from the ground not ten feet away.

"Who speaks to the Apache? It is the tongue of a pale-face," was the response.

"And the hand of a pale-face holds a revolver against your breast," said Reta. "Where is your young chief?"

"Panther Robe?"

"The young white chief I want."

"Under Panther Robe's war-paint is a white skin," said the Apache.

"Then it is Panther Robe for whom I seek. Where is he?"

Despite the menace of the revolver, the Apache came forward.

"War Belt show Panther Robe the pale-face," he said, but he stopped suddenly before Reta and then recoiled with an exclamation of surprise.

"White face is a woman!" he said. "Panther Robe will not look at her."

"*He shall!*" cried Reta.

"Panther Robe will keep his oath."

"What is that?"

"He has sworn that he will look into the face of no white woman. He loves the war-tribe of the Apaches and no fair white face shall turn him from the lodges of the red-man."

"But he shall see *me!*" flashed the white girl. "I, too, have taken an oath, and if it clashes with his I will not be turned back. Will you show me your young chief?"

"Panther Robe not with Apaches now."

"Liar!" exclaimed Reta. "A moment ago, before you had discovered my sex, you offered to conduct me to him. Now, you say he is not with the party. Your word is no better than a peon's. I will find Panther Robe myself."

Reta supplemented her last word with a bold step forward, but a moment later a red hand closed like a vise on her right arm.

"Not so fast, white face," said the Apache, whose eyes seemed to burn her cheek. "The tribe lost twelve good horses in the town of the white and yellow people to-night. The warriors have just sworn in the name of the Great Spirit to take no more captives till two more moons have died. For the white-faced girl to go to Panther Robe now would be for her to throw herself before a pack of famished wolves. The only white skin in the camp is Panther Robe's, but the war-paint of the Apaches hides it."

"Words shall not frighten me!" and Reta broke from the grasp that had relaxed during the Apache's speech. "You need not show me your camp, I will find it, and despite a thousand Indian oaths, I will stand face to face with Roy Robsart, your boy chief."

Reta knew that the halting place of the raiding Apaches was but a few yards ahead.

She seemed to forget her steed in her eagerness to reach the spot, for, dropping the rein which until that moment she had held, she started forward, leaving the astonished red-skin in bewilderment in his tracks.

"Roy! Roy! I have found you at last!" fell from her lips. "You have not sworn not to look into my face! The Indian I have just left tries to keep me back with a lie."

Reta rushed on, urged forward by an eagerness which she could not control.

All at once she came upon a large number of horses, and then burst suddenly among their merciless owners.

Twenty painted braves leaped at her with ejaculations of amazement, but every one instantly recoiled from the revolver which she thrust into their faces!

"Keep off, if your skins be red!" said the girl resolutely. "I am here to see Panther Robe—not you!"

Instantly from a dozen pair of lips rose the cry of "Panther Robe," and as it echoed through the camp, an agile youth, clad in Indian dress, scalp-lock and all, bounded forward, and halted in the circle that completely encompassed the girl.

"Who calls Panther Robe?" he asked.

"The warriors did, but for me!" cried Reta, springing toward the boy chief.

The voice seemed to pierce the young Apache like an arrow.

"Who is it speaks?" And wheeling upon Reta, whose symmetrical figure was revealed by the starlight, Panther Robe grasped her arm.

"Reta Grant!" was the reply. "Roy! Roy! my long hunt has ended at last! Years have separated us; but now we are reunited. The vow over the two cradles—"

A wild cry pealed from the boy chief's lips, and pushing the white girl from him, he turned away.

"No, no! It is the face of a white woman, and Panther Robe is bound by an oath!" he exclaimed. "He dare not break his word with the Great Father!"

Reta sprung after the boy chief before he could finish his last sentence.

"Hear me!" she cried. "Let the vow taken before yours was ever thought of be kept first. You are not Panther Robe, the Apache, but Roy Robsart, Captain Robsart's son!"

The appeal was in vain.

Three Apaches threw themselves between Reta and the boy chief, who had stopped at sound of her voice, and the strong arms of a fourth forced the youth further on.

"I will convince him!" flashed the girl. "Though I shoot my way to your boy chief, I will keep the purpose of my life!"

Up went the revolver again, and, as it covered the foremost red-skin, a pair of naked arms encircled Reta from behind, and, as she was lifted from the ground, the weapon was wrenched from her grasp.

Reta struggled, but in vain.

"I will see him!" she exclaimed. "Roy Robsart shall yet be glad to gaze into my face. Cool Sam shall bring him to terms!"

Then it was that, as if obeying a certain signal, the Apaches crowded around the daring girl.

Suddenly a loud voice rent the air.

"Let the Apache braves think of their dead horses. They have sworn to take no captives for two moons. Will they break their word to-night? The face of the squaw is white!"

The voice spoke Reta's doom.

CHAPTER V.

A CHIEF NO LONGER.

THE loud voice that reminded the Apaches of the oath of vengeance was enough to blanch Reta Grant's cheeks.

She stood unarmed in the midst of the redskins and completely at their mercy.

Panther Robe, the boy chief, stopped short at the terrible words, and mechanically turned toward the fair creature against whom they were directed.

"Panther Robe go away," said an Apache, springing to his side and clutching his arm, while there was a flash of devilish malice in his eyes. "The face of the squaw is white, and Panther Robe has sworn to look into the face of no white maiden. Let him remember that the daughter of Gold Belt is to welcome him from the war-trail and the hunt. Let him remember—"

The boy broke from the sub-chief's grasp with a mad exclamation.

"Unhand me, Fox Ear!" he cried. "I am a chief among the Apaches; you are nothing but a common warrior. They shall not kill the white girl."

But the Apache brave, with a resolution that lacked discretion, threw himself before the boy chief, and menacingly laid his hand on his knife.

Up went the revolver, but the Indian did not wait to be covered by it, but darted aside, leaving Panther Robe free to go to Reta's rescue.

He had moved a number of yards from Reta when the stern voice bade the Apaches remember their oath, and now he bounded toward the crowd that held her in thrall.

"Panther Robe!" exclaimed the savages, as they caught sight of him. "He is going to break his word!"

"I am, if you are going to harm the white girl," was the fearless reply.

"The Apaches' horses have been killed in the great town of the white and yellow faces."

"I know that. We were fools for charging through San Topeto, and we got about what we deserved."

"But the Apaches cannot forget."

"Neither can I," and the boy chief turned full upon the last speaker, a magnificent Indian giant, from whose broad shoulders fell a robe of spotted fawnskin. "Gold Belt, let the braves who have lost their horses go to my herd and pick out others."

"And let the white girl go?"

"Yes."

Proudly and with flashing eyes the Apache giant drew up before the undaunted boy.

"Does Panther Robe speak?" he asked haughtily. "Does Gold Belt stand before the boy he carried in his arms over the White Mountains in order to make him a chief of the Apaches?"

"I am Panther Robe, and I am proud of my adopted tribe. You have saved my life. To you I owe my feathers and my herds. I am an Apache. Under my war-paint there is a white skin."

"And a white heart!" said Gold Belt, with a sneer. "Panther Robe has broken his vow and thrown it to the winds. He wants to look again into the face of the white squaw."

"That is true; I cannot help it. Her life will not avenge the death of the horses. Go back to the town of the white and yellow faces. I will lead you. We will ride our horses over the wall, and among the lodges of the Mexicans we will shoot the men whose pistols dropped our steeds in the great square. Let the Apaches follow Panther Robe to revenge. Let them follow behind him, and he will show them twenty scalps for each good steed."

Brave as the speech was, it fell on hearts of stone.

Gold Belt, the Apache Hercules, wheeled instantly upon the foremost of the crowd whose bodies screened the girl from his view.

"Stand firm there!" he cried, as he swept his brawny arm before the crowd. "The heart of Panther Robe is turning from his adopted people. Hold the white squaw fast, and let your knives flash before her eyes."

For one moment the boy chief kept his tracks, and then, with a revolver in each hand, he strode toward the Indian phalanx, behind which, knife-surrounded, stood the girl.

"Divide or die! When the pistols of Panther Robe speak, a life goes out," he said.

Nearer and nearer to the Indian phalanx he moved with stately step; the star-beams glinted along the polished barrels of his deadly weapons and reflected the mad glare in his eyes.

He advanced until scarcely five feet intervened between him and the braves; the revolvers almost touched their breasts.

Gold Belt looked on in silence, but anxious to see who would conquer, he or the boy.

"Divide!" came over the leveled pistols in the same stern tones. "Warriors of the Apache nation, Panther Robe will not speak again."

Another step and then—the two Indians directly in front of Roy Robsart parted, and showed him a lane walled with arm and knife.

An ejaculation of rage parted Gold Belt's lips.

"They yield!" he hissed. "The braves I have

seen grow up from papposes yield to the weapons of a white boy."

Panther Robe was already springing down the living lane toward the girl still held by a pair of crimson hands.

At sight of him, having seen what he had already accomplished, the Indians immediately surrounding Reta drew back.

"That is right. Unhand the white squaw!" cried Roy, and then with a wild cry of delight the imperiled girl sprung toward him.

"At last!" she exclaimed, halting before him. "Heaven will not remember your foolish oath against you. But you have incurred the enmity of the tribe for me. Oh, Heaven! why were we to meet thus?"

The boy chief made no reply, but wheeled suddenly with the mien of a lion brought to bay.

"Stand by me," whispered the boy chief to the girl. "Despite the chief in the spotted robe, I am not friendless among these red-skins."

"I am here," answered Reta. "Now that I have found Roy Robsart, no Indian shall frighten me from my final purpose."

Still clutching his revolvers, the boy Apache turned to the Indian giant advancing toward him down the lane which he had traversed at the risk of his life.

Gold Belt's naked arm was outstretched, and his finger covered the young couple upon whom, through his tigerish eyes, he flashed all the rage and resentment of his Indian nature.

"Panther Robe has lied!" he thundered. "A man who breaks his vow is not fit to lead the Apaches on the war-trail. He is degraded in the presence of the braves. He and the white squaw may go forth unharmed and travel till yon star has set behind the hill. After that the hand of every Apache will be raised against them! Let Panther Robe tear off the sign of his leadership. He is an Apache no longer."

The voice died away, but the arm of Gold Belt did not drop.

"By heavens! I will do so," exclaimed Roy. "A chief no longer, eh? So be it! I turn my back to-night on the lodges of the Apaches! I travel from them till the bright star sets. Then let them hunt me and the white girl; but let them remember that the weapons that have dropped the buffalo will shoot for the flower of the pale-faces!"

The next moment the boy chief threw at his feet three feathers which had been interwoven in his scalp-lock, then he jerked from his shoulders several patches of panther-skin and cast them upon the ground.

The Indians looked on without a word.

"It is done," he said to Reta, with a smile. "From this moment I am an Apache no longer!"

"Thank Heaven!" ejaculated the girl.

"Come, then," and the boy chief's fingers closed gently on Reta Grant's white wrist. "We have far to go before that star sets. After that we will be hunted like wolves by the whole Apache nation."

"Hark!" said the girl and her hand clutched the boy's arm. "What are those creeping figures yonder?"

Roy looked for a moment over her outstretched hand.

"I count six—six men."

"My God! The Terrible Six from Texas!" cried the girl.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GIRL PARD SHOTS.

THE boy chief's start at Reta's exclamation told that the name and desperate deeds of the league were not unknown to him.

Could it be that Captain Dick and his fellows had followed the Apaches from Bed-Rock? was the question that the girl addressed to herself.

She had more than half-expected to encounter Cool Sam, for the letter left behind was intended for him; but she did not know that it had fallen into the hands of the captain of the Six.

The young couple stood like statues side by side, with their gaze riveted on the six dark figures counted almost audibly by the boy.

"Let them and the Apaches have it out," whispered Roy. "They cannot know that you are here, Reta."

"No; they cannot know; but—"

The girl's sentence was broken by the sudden rising of the six creeping figures not more than twenty yards away.

"Discovered!" ejaculated the boy, suddenly raising his revolver. "Let the border devils advance a step, and I will send the foremost to grass with a bullet in his head."

The action of the Six was so sudden that the girl recoiled a step; they were creeping objects no longer, moving like leopards over the ground, but six stalwart men, whose outlines in the fantastic starlight rendered them gigantic.

"Hands up!" rung out a stern voice, and even before Roy could get the drop on one of the men, he saw himself covered by twelve revolvers. "We've seen ye all along. Injuns or whites—hands up!"

There was a threat in the voice, a deadly menace in the stern command.

"Shoot, an' we'll riddle you both," continued the same voice, and a lower "forward!" carried the Terrible Six toward the young couple.

The boy Apache understood the customs of the border, and, grating his teeth, he lowered his weapon and glanced at Reta.

"We must submit," she said in reply to his look. "One good thing will come of this capture. Those men will take us far from the Apache before the star sets."

Roy made no reply; he was watching the border outlaws who came forward with revolvers still thrust out.

"Cool Sam's pard!" exclaimed Captain Dick as he halted in front of the pair.

"An' an Injun boy!" responded several of his men. "We'll make short work ov the young red. The daisy pard is all we want."

The objects that glittered in the starlight, as two of the desperadoes stepped toward Roy were ten-inch bowies; but the next moment Reta threw herself between the boy and the blades.

"Strike me first!" she cried. "This boy is no Indian."

"The Infant, by hokey!" ejaculated Captain

Dick, as he pushed the two villains aside, and clutched the boy chief's arm. "Look hyar, youngster! Be thar a white skin under yer Injun paint?"

"I am white. Until an hour ago I was an Apache chief, but now I am only Roy Robsart, as this girl says, an' not Panther Robe, the Apache."

"An' ther Infant, too?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Cool Sam does."

"You must ask him, then."

Captain Dick's brow darkened, as he held the boy at arm's length and looked into his face.

"Been playin' Apache, hev'n't ye?" he laughed.

"The tribe run ye out because ov a difficulty ov some kind, I s'pose? Wal, they'll never git ter catch ye!"

Ten minutes later the Six reached their horses with their prisoners.

"If you had not found me where you did, what would you have done?" ventured Reta to Captain Dick.

"Charged ther hull Apache squad, mebbe," was the quick response. "My daisy jumper, you've heard ov Cap'n Dick an' his Texans, hev'n't you?"

"Many times."

"But you've never had the pleasure ov their acquaintance afore, eh?"

"We have never met before."

A moment's silence followed Reta's reply.

"Whar did Cool Sam pick ye up, anyhow?" suddenly asked the desperado.

"I hardly know. We have been friends a long time."

"Left 'im in Bed-Rock to-night—gave 'im ther slip, didn't ye?"

The girl nodded.

"You were gone when I got to ther room."

Reta started.

"You?" she exclaimed.

"Yes; if ye hed stayed, we would hev met thar instead ov whar we did come together. Ez I said, I called at yer room, in Pepe's hotel, but ef you war gone you left word behind."

Reta's lips were parted by a gasp.

"Then—"

She did not finish the sentence, for her look had become a wild stare.

"Then Cool Sam didn't git ther letter, eh?" grinned Captain Dick. "He arrived a little too late, my Texas pink."

"And it fell into your hands?"

"Kinder so, thank ye."

"And my friend?"

"Cool Sam?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he's back thar yet, s'archin' Bed-Rock fer ye," was the reply. "See hyar, girl. Cool ez thet individual is, an' he is a cool 'un, ther further he keeps from ther Six Texans ther better 'twill be fer his future happiness. Writ on ther stone thet we war six louts from ther Lone Star State. When he did that, he stirred up six tigers; thet's what he did. But what got ye so hot arter thet white Injun 'twixt Scott an' Con?"

The question caused Reta to throw a swift glance toward Roy.

The boy was riding between two ruffians, who never ceased to watch him as if they feared the young eagle whose wings had been clipped.

"There is a secret not for you," Reta said resentingly, turning to Captain Dick again.

"A secret, eh? is thet young Apache yer brother?"

"No."

"Yer pard?"

"No."

"Then, we'll not be particular what we do with him. Halt!"

Instantly the cavalcade came to a halt.

A smart gallop over a narrow trail among the hills had brought the Texans and their captives to a wild spot almost entirely shaded from the starlight by rocks and trees.

"Scott," said Captain Dick, "take the gal on ahead."

The tones in which the command was spoken seemed to tell Reta what was about to happen.

"You are going to keep your name up for brutality," she exclaimed. "Roy is to be killed."

"Who said so?"

"You. Your orders for me to be taken on ahead means that his life is to be taken here."

"Ye'r apt at conclusions," laughed Captain Dick. "What's the white Injun to you ef he's neither pard nor brother? Do you know, girl, thet once thar war seven ov us instead ov six?"

"What has that got to do with this contemplated killing?"

"More than you think. Wal, the seventh Texan came ridin' inter our camp on the Rio Pecos one night dead. Think ov a dead man ridin' a hoss, girl. Round his neck thar war a lazo, an' in his heart three Injun arrers an' two ov 'em hed bands ov panther-skin close to the barb. Ask thet boy back thar who owned them two arrers. Didn't we sw'ar thet night over Cold Flint's body ter git even with the red devils what sent him inter camp dead in his saddle? An' now since we've caught the owner ov two ov them arrers, dare you ask fer his life?"

"I dare; I do!" said Reta.

"Better save yer breath. Wait a minute, Scott. Girl, all yer prayers wouldn't give thet young white Injun another minute ov life. Mebbe you've forgotten who we ar'."

"I have not. Texas has harbored many fiends since her birth as a State, but none greater than Captain Dick and his gang."

"Thanks fer the compliment," smiled the outlaw. "Now, Scott, you kin take the girl ahead."

The bronzed hand of the man called Scott was stretched forth to tighten on Reta's arm, but she recoiled from his touch and turned toward Roy.

"One word with him!" she cried.

"Very well," said Captain Dick.

The girl looked down the trail, but did not speak, for there was nobody for her to address; Roy Robsart and the rest of the band had disappeared as though the trail had opened and ingulfed them!

Captain Dick received the girl's look of consternation with a devilish leer of triumph.

"For what happens to him I shall hold you

personally accountable!" she suddenly exclaimed, as she whirled upon the leader of the Terrible Six.

"You, little pard?" he laughed.

"Yes—I! Girl though I am, and in your clutches, Captain Dick, I will avenge the death of the boy chief of the Apaches. Brother he is not, but notwithstanding, he is dearer to me for all that. Harm him to-night and I will take vengeance. Laugh at me. Call me a girl, but recollect that under Cool Sam's eye I have learned to kill!"

Reta ceased, and straightened in her saddle; her hand fell from Captain Dick's buckskin sleeve, but her eyes lost none of their fierce fire while they continued to regard him.

"We'll risk yer vengeance, little pink!" exclaimed the ranger captain. "We ginerally kill the snake thet hez bitten us. Ez I hev said, Gold Belt shall never ketch the boy chief he banished from the tribe to-night. Move on, Scott."

The Texan wheeled his horse as he uttered the last word, and Scott's finger's encircled Reta's arm.

"Come, girl. We'll ride on an' wait fer the boys."

For a second Cool Sam's Girl Pard seemed to reel in the saddle, but she firmly kept her seat, and her lips murmured:

"Strengthen me for the ordeal, Merciful Father! I have found Roy only to lose him. I am a prisoner now, but I will live to pay the murderers back. Girl though I am, if they take Roy's life, I will exterminate the six merciless Texan wolves!"

Scott who was conducting her down the trail did not hear this determined vow; he rode forward in a listening attitude as if he expected to hear certain sounds that would convey a story of crime to his ears.

Several hundred yards from the spot where Captain Dick dismissed the ranger and his prisoner the two horses were halted.

"Scott," suddenly said Reta, "what happened in San Topeto after Captain Dick found the letter left for Cool Sam?"

"Nothin'! We just mounted an' left the town."

"Cool Sam and your captain did not meet?"

"No."

Reta's face was seen to brighten.

She still had a friend and helper.

"Don't think thet Sam's a match for our hull gang," said Scott, who seemed to read the girl's very thoughts. "He bluffed us twice to-night, thet's a fact; but when we git the drop on him, ez we surely will, thet'll be triggers touched!"

Reta would have replied if three revolver-shots in rapid succession had not broken the stillness of the starry night.

Both Scott and the girl started.

"The cap'n's changed his mind," murmured the ranger; "they war goin' ter noose the young 'Pache."

As for Cool Sam's beautiful pard, she did not speak, but seemed to listen for more shots.

All at once, instead of more sounds of the same startling nature, the rapid gallop of horses smote the ears of ranger and girl.

"They've finished him!" said Scott, unconsciously speaking his conclusion aloud.

"Then my work begins!"

At that moment the mounted figures of Captain Dick and his four companions came in sight.

"Hyar we ar', Scott," said the Texan, drawing rein before Reta and her guard. "Whar's the little pink?"

"Here!" said the girl, speaking for herself, as she darted straight at her guard. "You have shot the banished chief of the Apaches; but the hand of Reta avenges the crime!"

The hand of the girl fell suddenly upon the butt of the revolver that overtopped the upper rim of Scott's belt, and ere the hand of the Texan could prevent the theft of it, Reta held it cocked in her hand.

"My God! Look out, cap'n!"

More than one hand darted at the girl pard as the bodies of the Texans shot forward, but all were blinded by the sudden flash of the revolver!

These events had not occupied a minute's time.

Back from the flash reeled the magnificent figure of the handsome outlaw captain, and two men caught him as he fell.

"Shoot the girl to pieces!" rose the maddened cry.

"No!" gasped Captain Dick. "Don't touch the Texas pink, but swear ter riddle Cool Sam, the man what taught her how ter shoot!"

"We swear it, cap'n!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE COOLEST MAN ON EARTH.

JUST one month later to the very night, a smooth-faced man, with an eagle eye and elastic step, crossed the principal plaza in San Topeto or Bed-Rock, and entered Pepe's Hotel.

His appearance created a little stir among the dark-faced fellows who surrounded the three peco-tables in the room which he entered, and several inquisitive glances were quickly exchanged.

It might have been noticed that one of two partners leaned over to his neighbor and whispered three words:

"He has come!"

The smooth-faced man seemed to take no more than a passing notice of the occupants of the room, but crossed it to the furthest wall, against which he leaned after lighting a long Spanish cigar.

Then nonchalantly sending smoke rings above his head, he surveyed the players from beneath the brim of his gray sombrero, whose only ornament was a band of silver lace of Mexican workmanship.

The majority of the peco gamblers soon ceased to notice the visitor, and prosecuted the various games with zest, but the twain whom we have particularized seemed to have lost interest in the cards before them.

"Wonder if he's found the girl an' the Infant?" asked one of the twain, after a brief study of the man among the smoke wreaths.

"We'll find out mebbe afore he gits out o' hyar. Hadn't we better let the cap'n know?"

"Not yet. Let Cap'n Dick swamp the bank

whar he is. Bed-Rock is a harvest fer us just now. It's richer hyer than runnin' off 'Pache horses."

"As long as we're not found-out."

"Diskivered er not, we'll play till we've broken Bed-Rock. When war ther 'Paches ter come back, Scott?"

"When the night got dark ag'in. Now's the time, but nary a red-skin yet."

The listener chuckled.

The visitor did not seem to have heard any of these words, and he did not move until the figure of a Mexicanish fellow, with broad shoulders and a brigandish cast of countenance, increased the crowd in the room by one.

Then it was that the smoker's eyes became animated, and his right hand moved toward his hip.

"Birds ov a feather like each other's company," he murmured. "If you're lookin' fer Captain Dick Carlos, he's not here."

The second visitor stopped at one of the tables and looked over the shoulders of Scott and his companion.

"No spottin' ov cards hyer, Mexy," growled Scott, looking up into Carlo's face.

"All right, senor. Don't growl like a grizzly."

"I'll growl when I want to and bite when I please. Mebbe you want the cap'n ov ther Texans ter choke you again!"

At this the countenance of Carlo grew darker than ever.

"Don't you feel his fingers at yer throat yet?" continued the gambler. "A throat like yourn, Greaser, just fits Cap'n Dick's hand from the shape ov it."

"Sacrista! the senor had better go on with his play. Even a Mexican hound sometimes uses his teeth."

"But you never do."

The next instant Carlo stepped back and his yellow hand made a rapid pass toward a heavy revolver that rested on his hip.

"Hands up, Greaser!" grated Scott the gambler as he sprung erect with eyes on fire. "What! do you refuse? Aha! look into thet!"

In the space of a second the bronzed hand of the speaker had thrust a revolver into the Mexican's face, and Carlo, with his own revolver hardly drawn, was forced to look down the muzzle.

That instant the quiet smoker left his station, and a quick stride carried him to the dangerous tableau.

"Don't shoot thet man," he said to Scott.

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"An' I say shoot!"

The last speaker was Scott's companion, and as he sprung up he supplemented his sentence with a fierce oath.

"Who are you?" demanded the quiet man, who was the least excited man in the house.

"Jim Burke, from Taos."

"Tell the truth, or ar' you afraid to tell the crowd that you ar' Rio Bob, one ov the Terrible Six? I know you all, an' I've marked every mother's son ov ye. Drop your shooters, er git ther contents ov mine in yer heads. Yer know me!"

"Yes, Cool Sam, we know ye!" flashed Scott, whose revolver fell from before Carlo's face as he finished.

"Then, let me invite you both to leave the house right away. Go to yer pards and vamose the ranch within fifteen minutes. Ye're all hyar. Ye've shaved yer mustaches an' cut yer ha'r, an' not a man in Bed-Rock hez recognized ye. Come back fer a gold harvest, I guess. Go! Tell yer cap'n thet Cool Sam's come back. I'll wait ten minutes fer 'im hyar, but my advice is ter leave San Topeto right off."

The two unmasked Texans looked into the cool eyes of the mysterious man, and then glanced at the crowd.

Every game had stopped, and the tableau presented in the poor light of Pepe's poorer candles was thrilling in the extreme.

"Yonder's the door," continued Cool Sam, pointing toward the entrance. "I give you my word of honor that if you agree to leave ther place in fifteen minutes, no man shall stir from this room till arter thet time. If you conclude to stay, they'll hunt you."

"They?"

"The men ov San Topeto."

"An' you, too?"

"P'raps. You know what I owe you; you know what took place onc month ago to-night. Don't ask me any questions about that time."

Carlo, relieved of the menace of Scott's revolver, had slipped along the greasy wall until he stood behind Cool Sam, who was backed by the regular players of the place.

Rio Rob looked at his companion.

"What ef we two conclude to stay in this room?" said Scott doggedly to Cool Sam.

"I wouldn't try ter ef I war you," was the reply.

The meaning of these words was apparent to all.

"We go; but by the avengin' gods! not from Bed-Rock!" blared Rio Rob. "You hev come back, Cool Sam, but only to die! It war you who taught thet Texas pink ter shoot, an' we hev sworn ter kill you fer it. We go, but only from this Greaser shanty. Scott an' Rio Rob ar' but two ov ther boss gang ov ther Southwest. Thar ar' four more, includin' Cap'n Dick, an' we're all hyar. Stay hyar five minutes, an' we'll accommodate yer. One ag'in six is a fool's fight."

"Then I'm a fool," said Sam, coolly. "I'll be hyar when ye come back."

Rio Rob backed toward the door with a cocked revolver in his hand and his black eyes flashing a world of hatred upon the coolest man on earth.

Scott was behind him, and the two men reached the threshold almost at the same time.

The spectators of the scene just described heard the pair leap from the porch, and then made a break for the door.

"Halt! Not a man leaves this house!" called out Cool Sam.

"You don't know the men who have just left," answered one of the men. "Captain Dick an' his Texans have been breakin' our monte banks for a week, an' we never suspected them. We kin corral 'em in ther plaza. A meaner set ov men never touched a trigger, or cast a lasso in New Mexico."

"I settle with 'em first, then the pards ov San Topeto," said Cool Sam. "No man leaves this house without my permission."

The men drew back from the door.

"They've touched you in a sore spot sometime," said one.

"I should say they had. For a month I've hunted other people than the Six; but now I'm goin' ter turn my attention to them."

"Whar's yer girl pard? She war with you when you war hyar before."

A slight start on Cool Sam's part betrayed the slightest agitation.

"No questions now," he said. "The Texans first, I tell you. Heaven knows whar Reta is to-night. I'll say no more. But Cool Sam will find his pard. I never failed ter git even in all my life."

More might have been said if one of the men near the door had not started back with an exclamation:

"Great Jehosaphat! the Six ar' in the plaza."

The plaza was well lighted by the reflector lamps that were fastened over the doors of Topeto's gambling dens and saloons, and those who looked over the shoulders of the American who had just spoken saw the six Texan giants advancing on the hotel.

"Remember! I settle with them first," said Cool Sam, striding toward the open door, which a look from him had prevented from being shut.

He passed through the pistoled crowd with a Colt in each hand, and as his foot struck the threshold his arms suddenly went up.

"Hands up!" came at that moment from the square.

"Up they ar'!" said the coolest man on earth. "Men ov Texas, Cap'n Dick an' all, ther individual what holds ther drop on ye sports ther name ov Cool Sam."

The six sports on the plaza had already halted.

Three feet in advance stood Captain Dick, with a Winchester within several inches of his shoulder.

"It's six ter one, Cool Sam!" he exclaimed.

"No! one ag'in' four!"

The sharp reply was instantly verified by the pressure of two steel triggers at the same moment, and the reports of the two revolvers seemed blended into one.

A Texan on Captain Dick's right and another on his left dropped their revolvers and reeled away!

Two shots, a crash, and two sharp death-cries!

"Remember yer oath, Texans!" grated Captain Dick.

"You sha'n't keep it now," came through the smoke of Cool Sam's pistols. "I want no more blood to-night. Take five minutes an' leave Bed-Rock. Arter thet you an' ther San Topetons fer it."

CHAPTER VIII.

FIVE MINUTES' NOTICE.

BEHIND the coolest man on earth stood a score of American and Mexican desperadoes, eager to rush out and complete the work just

begun, but the figure of the slayer forced them back.

"Come, cap'n," said one of the Texans, touching Captain Dick's shoulder. "We'll hev ter give it up fer a bad job to-night."

Captain Dick shot the speaker a look that seemed capable of killing.

"Not till I've had vengeance, Rio!" he grated. "The man in the door dies afore I leave Bed-Rock!"

"It's a game two kin play at," said Cool Sam, whose ears had caught the last words. "Cap'n Dick, I seldom hold a man at my mercy, an' then let 'im go. But go yer way. I will not drop you to-night."

"Then you never will!"

Captain Dick's Winchester dropped below his shoulder, and he said in a whisper to the men at his side:

"We go fer policy's sake, boys. Pick up our pards an' retreat to ther bosses. When we come back, this kentry will never forget ther visit."

The men under his authority stepped forward and began to lift the two who had dropped at the reports of Cool Sam's revolvers.

The retreat across the square or plaza was conducted without incident.

All who watched the movements saw the cocked revolvers that hung from the swarthy hands of the sullen Texans.

Scarcely had the band retired ere the plaza swarmed with life.

Oaths, bitter denunciations and exclamations of revenge soared toward the stars.

Bed-Rock was a Bedlam of rage and profanity.

"Thet man let 'em off!" said more than one mad fellow whose gold had, within the last few days, found its way to the pockets of the disguised Texans. "He held us back with eyes thet said shoot, an' he let the Texas bruisers off."

At last Cool Sam found himself face to face with a deputation of self-appointed men, every one of whom smarted under the loss of money at the hands of Captain Dick and pards.

"You had 'em all at yer mercy, an' ver took but two," said the spokesman of the committee, who was Cyclone Taos, already introduced to the reader. "You could hev dropped ther hull six."

"Wal, what ov it?" coolly inquired the man on the porch.

"It doesn't suit us. You wouldn't let us at 'em even after you hed quit shootin'. They got five minutes ter leave town in, an' they left. This isn't fair play."

The motley crowd which had surged up to the porch as if to back up Cyclone Taos in his effort to face the coolest man on earth, stood motionless, waiting for Cool Sam's reply.

"It suits me," he said, meeting Cyclone's gaze with a coolness that only irritated the crowd. Cap'n Dick bez left Bed-Rock. He's out thar within two miles ov ther plaza," and the speaker's long arm pointed toward the west.

"It's a plain trail, an' he'll not be hard to find."

"But thet's not it. Ther boys say thet you let 'im git off."

"I plead guilty to the indictment," and there was a merry twinkle in the depths of Cool Sam's eyes.

"They say you've got to leave town, too."

"Leave San Topeto?"

"Yes, an' to-night—within five minutes."

"A man can't go far in that time; but it's owin' a good deal to ther hoss."

The answer seemed to nonplus the crowd, the more so because even after Cool Sam had spoken, he showed no signs of going.

"Five minutes, eh?" he continued.

"Thet's ther orders," said Cyclone Taos.

"Put 'em in writin'."

"You don't mean thet?"

"I do. For ther first time in my life I've been given five minutes ter git out of a town. I want the command in writin' for when I settle down I want ter hang ther thing up in my shanty."

"Wal, ye'r goin'?"

"Sartainly, but I want ther orders in black an' white."

Cyclone Taos glanced appealingly at the crowd.

Here was a demand which he could not fill; the school in which he had graduated had never taught penmanship, and his grammar was of that nature which never reduces itself to writing.

"Hyar, Davy," he said, seeing in the crowd a young man who had taken a deep interest in the proceedings, "you picked up some writin' in ther States. Give this man what he wants—ther five-minutes order, in black an' white."

The young man nodded, and moved through the crowd, followed curiously by Cool Sam's eyes until he was lost to view.

"In less than five minutes Davy will be back," said Cyclone.

"Is my time goin' on now?" asked Sam.

"We'll be liberal an' say no."

Cyclone Taos was a good calculator, for three minutes had scarcely elapsed since the young man's departure ere he reappeared and handed a piece of paper to the leader of the crowd.

"It's all solid," said Cyclone Taos, advancing upon Cool Sam with the order held between two bronzed fingers. "Davy's worded it about right, I guess; but my opinion is, Sam, thet ye'll never git the chance ter frame it in this kentry."

"We'll see," was the reply, as Cool Sam received the paper and thrust it beneath his coat.

"Don't ye intend readin' it?" exclaimed Cyclone.

"What's ther use, since we all know it's a notice to leave?" he laughed. "I only wanted it in black an' white fer framin' purposes, ez I told you. Now, men of San Topeto, I'll say good-night."

He left the pillar against which he had leaned all this time, and the wild crowd instinctively shrunk away.

"Good-night!" said a dozen in mock courtesy, and one more forward than the rest asked:

"When ar' ye comin' back?"

The cool man turned slowly upon the speaker, whom he singled out from all in the twinkling of an eye.

"When bizness brings me hyar," he said. "Yes, when I want ter come ter Bed-Rock I'll come. No five-minute paper can keep me from duty! I've got a mission ter perform; the shootin' ov them two pards war a part ov it. One month ago, when I war hyar, suthin' took place which should never hev happened. I had a pard then; I hev none now. I would just ez soon quit yer town ez not, to-night. Without yer warnin' I wouldn't hev stayed. I killed two men when I could hev killed six. Thet's a crime in yer eyes, I see. The next time I come hyar, I may kill six instead ov two."

He lifted his sombrero as the last word fell from his tongue, and having executed a parting bow to the speechless crowd in his front, he turned and walked away.

Instantly a path opened for him, but not an eye lost sight of his angular form until he struck the shade of the trees in the plaza.

"We let 'im go off with a threat," said a voice at Cyclone's side which served to rouse the giant from a lethargy of some sort. "He's comin' back hyar ter kill six instead ov two! We ar' blamed fools ter let a man like thet read our death-warrant and then go scot-free."

Cyclone Taos hardly waited for the last word.

"We kin countermand thet order!"

"How?"

"With our revolvers! His hoss is in my stable. Some ov you fellows run thar, quick! If you miss 'im he kin be caught whar ther trail strikes ther mesquite grove. He did leave with a threat. That one man is worse than a hundred Cap'n Dicks. To my stable! Don't let him get my hoss."

A dozen men started across the plaza while Cyclone touched a comrade on the shoulder and said in low tones:

"We to ther grove, Nat. Ther order only took 'im out ov town. We promised nothin' arter thet."

The two men hurried away in a direction nearly opposite the one taken by the twelve San Topetans ordered to the stables; they leaped over the Indian walls and ran on until they reached, by a short cut, the gloomy mesquite clump a mile from the town.

The trail ran through the edge of the timber and was plain enough to be discernible in the starlight.

"Now, let 'im come," whispered Cyclone, cocking his revolvers as he turned his face toward San Topeto. "When you git the drop on a man like Cool Sam you've got ter touch ther trigger in self-defense."

There was no reply by the speaker's pard whose shoulders almost touched his as both men waited for Cool Sam.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed away.

Nobody came.

"Mebbe he's passed," said Nat at last.

"It can't be. But ter be sart'in we'll inspect ther trail."

Cyclone Taos dropped to earth as he finished and began to examine the horse-path that skirted the timber.

Suddenly he looked up into his companion's face with an expression of mingled rage and disgust.

"Passed he has," he said. "We've been

watchin' on a cold trail. He's a slick one an' a cool one; but it's a long ways ter safety."

"We'll let him go, Cyclone."

"The man what bluffed all Red-Rock? Never! He killed two when he could hev killed six. Let thet seal his doom. A better hoss than mine never follered a human trail an' a surer hand than Cyclone's never cast a lazo or pressed a trigger!"

"Foller him, then. I go back to Bed-Rock."

"So do I—for my hoss."

Cyclone Taos was rushing from the spot when voices, and the gallop of horses struck his ears.

"Our pards!" he said, halting.

The next moment a dozen mounted men drew rein in the starlight.

"His hoss wasn't in the stable," said the foremost, looking down into Cyclone's face.

"We know thet already. I'm goin' ter give 'im a race."

"Mebbe ye'd better read this first," and the speaker handed a bit of paper down to Cyclone.

"Whar war this found?"

"Stickin' to yer saddle."

Cyclone's rough hands unfolded the paper.

"Thar's writin' on it," he said after a glance; "but thet's all ther good it does me. I'll go back ter Davy."

He did not stop until he was again in Bed-Rock.

"Cipher thet out," he said thrusting the message into the young man's hands. It's from Cool Sam. The hound left it on my saddle when he got his hoss."

Davy the youth looked at the paper a moment and then glanced up with a smile.

"Give me that pilgrim for a cool one," he said.

"What does he say?" blurted Cyclone anxiously.

"Only this," and Davy read:

"Within ten days I promise to pay all ther debts I owe, an' ter set 'em up ter all San Topeto."

"COOL SAM."

"He's a liar!" cried Cyclone Taos. "He's a liar in a loud voice, an' I'll prove it."

CHAPTER IX.

TRAPPED.

"WITHIN ten days from date. Thet's my promise, an' I'll keep it!"

Cool Sam, the speaker, was several miles from the confines of San Topeto as the words just recorded dropped from his tongue.

He had left the mesquite grove behind, and was among the mountains that reared their heads far above the plain where it thinned.

He was still thinking of the paper he had left on Cyclone's saddle ere he left the wild town, and now, miles away, he was renewing its singular promise.

"A feller sometimes strikes a vein ov ore whar he doesn't look for one," he went on, as his horse toiled up the trail which led him toward the summit of the wooded peak that stood outlined like a monster against the stars.

"Who would hev thought thet Dictionary Davy, ez they call him back yonder, knew just what I've been huntin' for? When he went off

ter git up ther five minute bizness thinks I thet'll be written ter order, but when I read ther document at ther stable I got a different opinion ov ther chap. Thet's why I left thet paper on Cyclone's saddle. Thanks ter you, Davy. You've put me on the right trail at last an' I didn't lose anything by goin' ter Bed-Rock to-night."

It is time, reader, as you have no doubt surmised from Cool Sam's audible meditations, that the document penned by Davy contained more than a notice to quit San Topeto within a given time.

It read thus:

"COOL SAM:—If you want to accomplish something, take the trail past the mesquites and keep it to the Twin Peaks. Then follow the trail to the right and look carefully around when you reach the Hanging Rock. If the Terrible Texans—only four now, thanks to your revolvers—have not anticipated these directions, you will find your girl pard before morning. The Hanging Rock conceals the mouth of the largest cave in the range. I need not tell you who occupies it. Use your five minutes. They may eventually bring you victory. I have watched the Texans a week in San Topeto and I give you the benefit of the information I obtained.

"DICTIONARY DAVY."

Had not cool Sam a right to be pleased with the contents of this message?

Where he least expected any information, some of the most important kind had been obtained; he had found a friend, a helper, where he expected no assistance.

"We never met afore to-night," he went on, his mind still on Davy and his message, "but I owe you one, Dictionary. When I go back ter Bed-Rock ter set 'em up to its hard crowd I'll not forget you. The man what helps Cool Sam wins a friend that sticks ter him through thick an' thin."

The trail winding hither and thither among the mountains like the track of a serpent continued to ascend, carrying the coolest man on earth toward the stars.

"Up to ther Twin Peaks, then ther trail to the right till I strike Hangin' Rock. I know whar they all ar'. I've been thar afore but thet cave ar' new to me."

Not for an hour was a halt of any kind made.

Then, with the slightest movement of his bridle-hand, Cool Sam stopped his horse, and leaned forward in his saddle.

He had stopped in the middle of a trail which seemed to end suddenly against a rock of gigantic dimensions.

This was the Hanging Rock, but it did not terminate the trail, for Cool Sam's keen eyes saw it winding to the left around the giant rock.

"Hyar we ar'," he said to his horse, and sliding to the ground, he glided forward with eyes and ears on the alert.

At the base of the hanging stone he dropped on all-fours, and thrust his head under it.

There was a dark opening there!

After a moment's inspection of the cavernous place, he drew back and sought his steed.

"Hit or miss, I'm goin' in, Swifthoof," he said. "Davy says thet Reta's in thar, an' I want her, ye know."

He led the horse aside among some bushes, and then came back to the rock.

A minute later the man was not to be seen by the stars, for he had drawn his body into the cavern and stood in a corridor so dark that he could not see a hand held near his face.

"It's all for you, girl, to-night, but for revenge to-morrow," he said. "If you ar' beneath this rock I'll find you; trust Cool Sam for thet."

With a revolver in each hand he moved forward, ready for any emergency.

All at once he halted.

A light ahead!

"Davy war right. The gal is hyar," he ejaculated.

Once more he went forward, this time for fifty yards without stopping.

The light grew stronger as he advanced; he was approaching a cabin which was well lighted, and which must, therefore, be inhabited.

The floor of the corridor was now a gradual ascent, but the coolest man on earth reached the level of the chamber floor, and crouched there for a brief survey.

He found himself in front of a chamber of good dimensions, which were revealed by a fire that burned on the earthen floor.

He saw the walls of dark gray stone, and the ceiling a little lighter, and high.

"Now, if I could only see my little pard!" he exclaimed. "If she knew I war hyar—"

He saw at that moment the very person for whom he had expressed a wish, and Reta, his girl pard, stood before him in the light of the fire.

"Jehosaphat! she's ther same daisy as ever!" he exclaimed, for a moment starting back. "Davy ov San Topeto did not lie when he told Me I'd find her under ther Hangin' Rock. I'm hyar, Reta, an' you must tell Old Sam what took ye from ther town so sudden."

The girl had advanced into the brilliant fire-light, and stood boldly revealed to Cool Sam.

If the border pard had noticed her carefully he would have seen the pensive look she wore, half-sad and despairing, like a bird in captivity.

He did not see this, for, eager to join the girl, he sprung forward, and landed almost at her feet.

For a moment she saw him not, then, looking up, she shrunk back with a cry:

"My God! You here?" And then her voice dropped to a whisper:

"You have entered the jaws of death! This cave is in the possession of—"

"Cap'n Dick an' pards!" finished a loud voice, for in that cave a whisper even had an echo.

Cool Sam turned half-way round, his gaunt but well-knit figure clearly revealed by the fire, and with a revolver in each bronzed hand.

One look told him all.

Twenty feet away with Winchesters at their shoulders stood Captain Dick and his stalwart pards.

"We've got ther drop on you this time, Cool Sam!" came over the captain's rifle. "Look yer last toward heaven an' repent in a minute, fer by the eternal stars! thet's yer limit ov life!"

The coolest man on earth never flinched.

"They've trumped my hand," he coolly said.

CHAPTER X.

TOO MUCH FOR THE FOUR.

It was a thrilling tableau, that which the fire revealed.

Reta the girl pard shrunk back with ashen lips; power to speak seemed to have departed from her tongue.

The only cool man in the cavern was the person whose life hung by the slenderest thread.

There was eagerness in the eyes of the terrible Texans; the bronze fingers at the triggers were ready to take his life.

"Yer minute's up, Sam," suddenly said Captain Dick. "Ov course you've done yer pray-in'. Now, whar do you want 'em, through head er breast?"

What a dreadful choice!

"I'm not overly handsome, thet's a fact, but I don't want my face spoiled," was the cool reply, in which not a tremor was observable. "But look hyar for a moment."

"Ef he gets a parley in he's safe, cap'n," said one of the Texans.

Captain Dick seemed to realize this.

"No words, Cool Sam!" he said, sternly. "Time is up, I've said. You're goin' to die now."

"Not just now," rung out a voice from an unexpected quarter, and the figure of a sylph sprung through the firelight to fall on Cool Sam's breast. "Shoot now, if you will, men of Texas!" and she faced the dark-faced four—"shoot your victim to death, but your bullets pierce me first!"

Captain Dick's rifle left his shoulder mechanically, but those of his companions lowered not an inch.

They cared naught for a young girl's life.

Cool Sam stood before them; that was enough, and they were ready to reach his heart through Reta's body.

A sign from Captain Dick, or an approving glance, and the three Winchesters would have spoken the twain's doom.

Captain Dick, red to the temples, took a mad step forward.

"Leave that man!" he thundered at Reta.

Her look was her defiant answer.

"I'll give you thirty seconds, girl. We can't fool with Cool Sam. He must die where he stands!"

"Then two die instead of one!"

The captain of the Texans stood still for a moment.

Cool Sam did not attempt to shake off the girl who had leaped between him and the rangers' rifles, but rather seemed to look over her shoulders at Captain Dick with eyes that blazed with triumph.

"You've got ter shoot 'em apart," suggested one of the trio who stood behind the captain.

"I b'lieve it, Rio," and out flew Captain Dick's revolver and up went his arm.

"Separate!" he exclaimed.

"All hunkey, cap'n!"

As Cool Sam spoke he cast Reta away, and she spun toward Captain Dick and his men like a person hurled from the hands of a giant.

"My God!" cried the ranger captain.

"Now, my Texas daisies, drop yer weepin'!"

followed the exclamation in terrifying tones, and the outlaws of the border saw the startling change which had taken place.

Cool Sam was master of the situation, for he stood erect with his long arms outstretched, and at the end of each was a revolver of the largest pattern, a veritable magazine of death!

"Take yer choice! I'm not pertick'lar what you do," continued Cool Sam. "I've taken things easy all my life, an' I'd just ez soon shoot ez spare. However, I always like ter give a feller a choice. Downgo either men or guns. It's fer you ter say which it shall be."

That was enough.

The rapid glance which Captain Dick sent toward his followers from beneath his black brows said: "Fools! down with the rifles," and instantly the three weapons fell.

Cool Sam's triumph produced no change of countenance.

He merely glanced at the girl, and said:

"Git out ov this."

Reta, with a quick glance at the Texans, moved toward the entrance.

"Hold! That girl is our prisoner!" cried Captain Dick.

"She's my pard!" said Cool Sam. "Go on, Reta. I hold in my hands documents ov release which no sensible man will dispute. Go on, I say."

Reta reached the corridor and sprung into its darkness with the agility of a fawn.

Then Cool Sam backed toward the spot with his arms still outstretched and his eyes, as well as his deadly weapons, covering the mad men held at his mercy.

They dared not move, though they itched to leap forward and shoot their enemy to pieces.

The revolvers of the cool man held them spell-bound, and at bay.

Four against one, but the one was winning.

Cool Sam reached the beginning of the corridor.

"Thar's many a slip 'twixt man an' trigger," he said. "Gentlemen ov Texas, permit an humble pilgrim ter bid yer good-night. Foller me ef it strikes yer fancy. I've been follered afore, but them what trailed me never finished the'r job somehow or other. Reta an' me ar' united ag'in, an' thet satisfies me. Pinks ov ther Rio Grande, an affectionate good-night!"

The cutting sarcasm and mock courtesy of the last sentence was too much for human nature.

The three Texans sprung toward Captain Dick with oaths which upto that time had been suppressed by the cool pard's revolvers.

"We'll get him yet!" they hoarsely cried.

"By heavens! that cool devil shall not escape us!"

Captain Dick did not attempt to detain them, but saw them reach the dark passage with uplifted rifles.

It was not probable that Cool Sam and pard had reached the end of the way.

"Riddle them, boys!" ejaculated Rio Rob, and the next second the three rifles were sweeping the corridor with their deadly contents.

Not until six shots apiece had been fired did the three human tigers stop and turn their faces toward their captain.

"Thar's a dead man 'twixt hyar an' ther openin'," said Rio Rob.

"An' a girl, too, no doubt," was the reply. "I didn't want the daisy touched."

"Not arter she saved her pard to-night?"

Captain Dick bit his lip; but did not reply.

"It's all one, cap'n. We hed ter extirpate 'em both. Thar war no other alternative. Kill only Cool Sam, an' ther gal would hev turned hunter; wipe out Reta, as ye call her, an' we'd hev made a tiger out ov thet shootin' machine from Bed-Rock. So it war best ter kill 'em both."

Captain Dick walked to the mouth of the corridor and listened.

Not a sound came to his ears from its darkness.

"A light," he said, putting back his hand.

Rio Rob sprung to the fire, and snatched a torch from its center.

"I'll look at our work, cap'n," he said, and a moment later he had passed Captain Dick, and was pushing down the corridor.

Five minutes passed away; but Rio Rob did not return.

The men who ever and anon glanced down the corridor saw the torch burning apparently at one place; but it did not reveal the figure of their pard.

"Suthin's wrong down thar!" And Captain Dick went down the corridor without warning.

Several bounds brought him to the torch.

Instead of being held by a human hand it was thrust into a gaping crack in the wall.

Beside it stood a figure which Captain Dick recognized with a quick start that drove him clear across the corridor to the opposite wall.

"Rio Rob! Great heavens!"

Well might the captain of the once formidable Six stand against the stone wall and stare across the corridor at the man who kept the torch company.

It was Rio Rob; but motionless against the wall, with a bowie in his breast that seemed to pin him to the unfeeling stone.

The ranger's exclamations brought his companions to the spot.

"Yer shootin' never touched a ha'r," he cried, pointing at the ghastly man in the glare of the flames. "Rio came hyar an' found ther coolest, deadliest demon thet ever crossed ther Texan border. Thet proves it. No sw'arin' now thet Cool Sam shall pay for this. We'll settle with 'im without an oath. Yesterday thar war six ov us—six pards thet made up ther most powerful brotherhood ever known in ther Southwest; today we count but three; but we'll be worse than ther hull six."

Execrations and oaths of the wildest kind echoed throughout that stone-walled corridor.

Despite Captain Dick's words, the two men took vows terrible enough to pale the cheeks of a hardened villain.

Suddenly Captain Dick bounded across the corridor uttering at the same moment a cry of horror and surprise.

At the same instant the body of Rio Rob fell forward, and was caught in the captain's arms.

"Our pard still lives!" shouted Captain Dick, looking into the faces of his companions.

"Thar's death left in his yaller hands!"

We need not say that the body, lowered to

the floor, was quickly surrounded by a breathless trio.

They were rewarded for their pains; Rio Rob opened his eyes, stared at the dark faces above him, and gasped:

"Live fer vengeance, Rio!" cried Captain Dick. "We'll pay Cool Sam fer this bowie-stab!"

"Not—Cool Sam—wasn't him!" said the wounded Texan.

"The girl, then! Beauty an' youth sha'n't intercede fer ther Texas daisy."

"It wasn't—Reta. They—were—gone when—I—got hyar."

"Who did it, then?"

Rio Rob attempted to reply, but his head fell back upon Captain Dick's dark sleeve.

The mouth of a flask was instantly at his lips.

"Neither Reta ner her pard? Who then?" ejaculated the captain of the Six.

The only reply was an ominous gurgle in the outlaw's throat.

It sounded like a sentence, and Captain Dick's ear dropped to the bloody lips.

But the answer never came, for when the rattle ceased, the man's eyes had the stare of the dead in their depths.

Captain Dick sprung up, repeating his puzzling question:

"Neither Reta ner her pard? Who then?"

He was met by two nonplused men, whose gaping mouths only increased the mystery.

"Rio Rob must hev been mistaken," he said, at last.

"He ought ter know, cap'n. He hed the torch, an' whoever loaned 'im thet bowie struck in the light."

"Ther blade—yes! I never thought ov it."

Captain Dick drew the ten-inch bowie from Rio Rob's bosom, and examined it in the light of the torch.

All at once he looked up into the faces of his pards, and his eyes seemed to say:

"I know who did it!"

CHAPTER XI.

HUNTED BY RED DEMONS.

"WE got out ov thet hornets' nest without bein' stung, eh, Reta?" chuckled Cool Sam to the girl who halted with him on the mountain-trail a mile from the cave under the hanging stone.

Reta's first reply was a smile of satisfaction, and then she said as she looked up into the pard's face:

"We are now prepared to prosecute the search for Roy."

"Fer ther Infant ez I call 'im! Reta, don't you think thet Cap'n Dick an' his pards finished ther Infant thet night they gobbled you in arter yer time with ther 'Paches?"

"No, I do not, and I have good reasons for believing that Roy Robsart, the boy chief of the Apaches, is still alive somewhere."

"Thet's clever news, my little pard."

"I know that after the three shots which followed our sudden separation, Captain Dick and his men came up, saying that the deed was done and that the boy chief was no more. I am convinced that Roy is not dead. He can be found."

"Then we will find him!" said Cool Sam. "Thet shave back thar war rather close, but thar's an excitement in close shaves that suits me. You never heard 'em say whar the Infant might be?"

"Only once."

"Wal?"

"Do you know where the Broken Mountain is?"

Cool Sam's eyes seemed to dilate just the least.

"Kinder, Reta," he observed. "If I war put to ther test I'd be a walkin' g'ography ov this kentry. Ther Broken Mountain, eh? What ef I war ter say that we ain't two mile from ther spot now?"

"No!" exclaimed the girl in her delight.

"True ez old-time pre'chin'. Foller thet path thar fer less than two miles an' you'll stagger onto ther old stone pile. One of these days when the whites settle up this kentry ther mountain 'll be a curiosity. It's stone piled on stone till they seem ter touch ther sky—the't's what ther Broken Mountain is. War Roy seen thar since ther shootin'?"

"From what I gathered from the Six he was."

"How long 'go?"

"About two weeks."

"Thet's a long time in this Greaser land. You haven't forgot thet Gold Belt ther 'Pache chief swore ter hunt ther Infant arter a sart'in star set, hev ye?"

"I have not, Sam, but—"

"Don't think he'll not try ter keep his word. I know thet Injun. Other reds may forget their words and leave a trail, but thet devil never! Let him hunt ef he wants ter. Mebbe he'll find ther Infant, an' mebbe he won't."

Before Reta could reply, the horse which had carried them both from the mouth of the Texans' cave started off again, and they were once more moving over the winding trail not wide enough at any point for two steeds to move abreast.

In a few minutes the object known as the Broken Mountain was reached, and drawing rein before a pile of rough boulders which seemed to have been misshapened by some terrible convulsion of nature, he slid nimbly to the ground.

The light of another day had by this time broken over the mountainous region.

Reta, by Cool Sam's direction, looked up to be astonished at the sight that greeted her eyes.

As far up almost as sight could stretch, she saw rocks piled upon rocks in wild confusion, and she realized the aptitude of the appellation "Broken Mountain."

Some of the boulders were larger than a miner's cabin, and all were arranged without any regard to order.

The peak of the mountain seemed to touch the blue sky overhead, and Reta forgot, in her admiration of the wild scene, the presence of the bronzed pard.

"Thet's ther Broken Mountain, girl," he said, when Reta turned to him once more. "Ef ther infant hez chosen it fer a den he knew what he war doin'."

"We will find him wherever he is!" exclaimed

Reta, with enthusiasm. "The Texans were sure that they saw him here; I am certain of it!"

"Then we're in for a hunt. I promised ter go back ter Bed-Rock within ten days an' stand treat fur ther hull crowd besides. Thar's a heap ter be accomplished in thet time, but," with a faint smile, "I guess Cool Sam is equal to ther emergency."

He paused rather abruptly and took a quick stride forward.

Reta saw him stoop suddenly fifty yards down the rocky trail and lean over a stone, revolver in hand.

After a moment's inspection that seemed to satisfy him, he came back with animated countenance.

"What did I tell you about thet red snake keepin' his word?" he said, halting before Reta. "Thar's a fissure in this rock-pile; it's one ov the strange things connected with it, an' I've just looked down inter ther chasm."

"And you saw—"

"More 'Paches than I've seen in six months."

Reta gave a slight start; she could not help it.

"Old Gold Belt is tryin' ter keep his word," Cool Sam went on. "He said he'd hunt ther Infant after a certain star had set. Wal, thet star went down a month ago, an' I'll stake my head thet he's been on ther hunt ever sence. Mebbe Roy's been tracked ter Broken Mountain by thet 'Pache devil. Wal, we're hyar, too, ain't we Reta?"

The girl's reply was quick and resolute.

"We are here—here to prevent Gold Belt from keeping his oath, even if he finds Roy!" she cried. "Show me the creeping figures you saw in the fissure, Cool Sam. Let me see the creeping serpents of Apachedom."

"Come, then," said Cool Sam, and catching Reta's wrist, he started rapidly down the trail toward the point from which he had caught sight of the Indians.

For several minutes the two singular pards, Cool Sam and Reta, watched the Apaches as they climbed toward the top of the wall, which they searched as they advanced.

All at once Gold Belt was seen to halt, and then one-half of his body disappeared in an opening which, until that moment had escaped the gaze of the pards.

"Heavens! a cave!" exclaimed the girl.

"But not the one they want to find."

The Apache chief had already disappeared, and the rest of the red climbers were moving toward the same point with ejaculations of success.

"It's a race to see who'll git thar first," smiled Cool Sam.

He had scarcely ceased when a dull report, like that produced by a rifle when fired underground, was heard, and the next second, as the air was rent by a yell of agony, the figure of the Apache chief staggered to the opening!

Reta, with a glad cry of "Roy!" sprung erect, and raised her rifle, but Cool Sam grasped her arm.

"Not yet," he said. "Thet red snake war hard hit."

Yes, Gold Belt had been, indeed, hard hit.

For a moment, certainly not more, the stalwart chief of the Apaches kept himself from falling by clinging to the rocks at the mouth of the cavern, but all at once, with a yell of horror, he reeled to the edge, and pitched headlong, over the heads of his warriors, toward the depths a hundred feet below!

"They'll all charge the cave for revenge!" said Reta.

"Ov course, pard. Thar they go now!"

The Apaches had been rendered furious by the sudden doom of their chief, and filling the air with murderous yells, all rushed as rapidly as possible over the rocky wall toward the cave.

A dozen red hands reached the level of its floor at the same instant, and Cool Sam and his pard saw the knives gripped by the clinched teeth of the braves.

"My God! they'll reach Roy and finish him in a moment!" was Reta's startling cry.

"Not while I'm around, my daisy pard."

Two hands shot toward the struggling mass of red-skins as the last word was uttered, and the next instant the terrible revolvers were at work.

CHAPTER XII.

PROTECTING HIS SCALP.

BEWILDERED by the unexpected assault, the red-skins found themselves in a precarious situation.

Throwing her rifle to her shoulder, Reta opened fire on the astonished set, and sent more than one to the bottom of the fissure as she worked the weapon.

Maddened by the attack, some attempted to gain the cavern where Gold Belt had met his doom, and others went down the jagged wall faster than they had made the ascent.

In less than five minutes after the opening attack not an Apache was to be seen except those who lay mangled and dead in the bed of the rocky canyon.

"Thet's what I call a gin'ral wipin' out," said Cool Sam, with a glance at Reta. "Now, ef we war across thar we could hold a confab with the Infant. Hello! thar he is now."

At that moment the well-built figure of a youth appeared at the mouth of the cave, and Reta started forward with an exclamation of joy.

"Roy! Roy! We have found you again, thank Heaven!"

The boy responded in a manner that assured the twain of his identity, and then hurried back into the opening.

He reappeared a minute later, however, with a coil of rope in his hand, and stepped to the very edge of the wall.

With a glance at the twain, who watched him closely, he cast the lariat upward and dexterously landed the noose over the point of a rock near the top of the wall.

Cool Sam watched him now with admiration, for, having secured his noose to the rock, the boy Apache was moving upward by aid of the wall, and landed at last at the top.

"Give me the Infant yet!" fell from the border pard's lips. "He's a Jim-dandy an' no mistake, Reta. He hez a way ov gettin' across

this gulch thet we don't know anything about—"

"The Apaches again!" interrupted the girl, as she pointed up the trail over which they had traveled to their present position.

"Ar' the red snakes creepin' up behind us?" grated Cool Sam, as he turned deliberately at Reta's exclamation.

"They are on the trail. I saw three crawlers when I spoke. Ah! Roy has disappeared. He will rush into a new danger in attempting to reach us!"

"Thet's the youngster's lookout," was the reply.

"Can't we warn him?"

"Not now."

If the Apaches had reached the upper trail from the bottom of the ravine, Cool Sam and his pard were in an unpleasant situation.

They were liable to be attacked from the rear by a lot of Indians bent on vengeance, and in the event of such an attack their defense could only be brief.

Coolly the border pard turned toward the threatened point with his revolvers.

"They've got to be met," he said, in audible tones. "A foe in the rear is meaner than a dozen in front."

Reta, who heard him, sprung to his side with ready rifle; but Cool Sam's bronze hand pushed her back.

"I'll attend to ther call alone, pard," and Reta saw him move away at a half-crawl toward the point where she had caught sight of the Indian heads.

Protected by the huge rocks, the fair girl held her breath and awaited the result.

All at once the crack of a revolver broke the stillness and as a red-skinned figure leaped into view to disappear immediately, another shot rung out, and the gaunt figure of Cool Sam came reeling down the trail.

"My God!" cried Reta, horror-stricken at the sight. "The red fiends have robbed me of my friend!"

Cool Sam kept his feet till he reached Reta's side.

"Winged! an' by a 'Pache!" he grated. "You an' ther reds fer it now, Reta!"

He reeled against a rock ten feet beyond the spot where the girl had planted herself, and dropped on the trail, his hand relinquishing the revolvers which until that moment they had clutched with desperation.

Three yells so wild that they pierced Reta's ears like knives followed the cool man's fall, and the Apaches leaped into view a few yards up the trail.

"You can't scalp him while I am here!" parted her lips. "I have sixteen shots in this rifle for demons like you."

The Apaches saw her erect on the trail with the deadly weapon in her grasp, but the sight did not deter them.

"Only white girl!" they cried contemptuously. "We want the scalp of the big killer."

"Not while I stand here, I say," was Reta's response. "Stand back! I am here to kill!"

They heeded her not; the reply was a shout of derision, and down the narrow path they came.

Suddenly, but with great coolness, the cheek

of the girl dropped till it met the burnished stock of her Winchester.

"I keep my word!" she murmured, as her finger pressed the trigger, and the first Apache reeled back against his companions.

The death-shot brought all to a halt, and in the confusion that followed Reta cast aside the empty shell.

"Back to cover, or die where you are!" she cried. "The scalp of Cool Sam shall never hang at an Indian's belt."

Then the rifle spoke again and again—two shots in bewildering succession—and the terrified Apaches beat an unceremonious retreat to cover.

"White squaw kill like tall slayer!" they exclaimed. "Apaches get her by 'm by, mebbe. She no keep her scalp long."

The Indians had disappeared as if by magic, but Reta felt that the respite would be very brief.

She knew the implacable nature of the fiends by whom she was confronted, and she could not hope to withstand the attack of the whole force by which the vicinity had been invaded.

The lull that followed the retreat of the Apaches was liable to be rudely broken at any moment.

Reta went back to Cool Sam, whose face was covered with blood, although his eyes did not indicate death.

"Beat 'em off did ye, pard?" he asked, meeting Reta with a proud smile. "I hope you got ther skunk what sent his bullet along my head. I'm worth a dozen dead men yet. See hyar! I kin stand an' handle ther droppers ez usual!"

He got upon his feet as he finished and once more clutched his deadly weapons.

"Never mind. I'm goin' back to Bed-Rock ez I said I would. I told Cyclone Taos in the note I pinned to his saddle that I'd come back with all my bizness accomplished an' treat ther hull crowd. An' I'll do it, Reta, er j'ine ther angel band!"

Among the huge rocks, sufficient to protect a company of soldiers, the girl pard bound a handkerchief about Cool Sam's head and received his hearty thanks.

"When the Infant j'ines us, we'll be a match fer all ther 'Paches," remarked Cool Sam.

"Roy! yes. Heavens! what has become of him?" cried Reta.

"Oh, he'll turn up O. K. Just give the youngster time. The last we saw ov him he war makin' tracks from the top ov the gulch. Bet yer life, Reta, he knows Broken Mountain like a book. He'll git hyar in time. I bet my last kerd on Roy."

These words reassured the girl, and she said smilingly:

"You haven't met Roy in a long time, Sam?"

"Wal, I should remark, Reta," was the answer. "Not since your father an' his stood over yer cradles an' put ther hands ov two babies together an' vowed that they should grow up an' live fer one another. I war ther only witness ov thet compact. an', since your father is dead, I've tried ter raise ye fer its fulfillment. Jim Grant an' Bob Robsart war pards, true ez steel, an' they wanted their children to grow up the same. When I heard

thet Injuns had swooped down on Bob's ranch, killed him an' carried ther baby boy off, I thought it war all day fer ther scheme, but arter you fell inter my hands, Reta, with yer dyin' father's injunction ter find ther Infant an' keep ther oath by ther cradle, I got a new lease ov life, as it war, an' I begun ter raise you fer ther work. But you gave me ther slip in Bed-Rock, girl; you found ther Infant without my assistance, but lost him again."

"Yes," said Reta, "when I heard the voice that threatened Bed-Rock with destruction that memorable night, I knew that I had found Roy Robsart. I could not restrain myself, and away I went, leaving a letter behind for you."

"Thet letter fell, ez we know, inter the clutches ov Captain Dick. But fer thet, girl, we might not be hyar, with Injuns ready ter pounce upon us."

"And with Roy lost again," added Reta.

"Don't fret about thet daisy youth," said Cool Sam quickly. "The way he settled thet Injun what invaded the cave shows thet he kin take care ov himself."

The girl might have replied, but for a somewhat startling event that interposed itself at that moment.

The outlines of a human figure rose suddenly above the boulder against which Cool Sam leaned.

Reta saw it and uttered a cry that startled her companion, who turned to hear the girl follow herself with an ejaculation of joy.

The next moment a figure dropped cat-like before the strange pards.

"The Infant! by Jehosaphat!" cried Cool Sam. "Put her thar, first, boy. Yer hand war a baby's hand when I touched it last. Put 'er thar, I say!" And covering with his bronze palm the hand Roy Robsart thrust forward with a smile, he jerked the boy almost off his feet!

CHAPTER XIII.

THREE THUNDERBOLTS DROP.

"SOMEBODY gave it away, an' thet person is in Bed-Rock. Didn't Cool Sam come straight to the cave an' find us hyar? I want the drop on the dandy what posted him. Let him an' his Girl Pard go fer the present. Thunderbolts are needed in Bed-Rock just now, an' three ov the original Six are left."

Need we name the speaker?

He stood in the cave under Hanging Rock, in the light of the fire that leaped up from the hard floor, and gazed at the only two left of his desperate followers.

Cool Sam, as we have seen, had taken Reta from the underground retreat to encounter the Apaches on the Broken Mountain, and to join Roy Robsart there after some thrilling adventures.

Captain Dick and the remnant of his band did not think of the two pards now.

He thought only of certain enemies in San Topeto, beyond whose confines only a few hours before he had allowed himself to be driven at the muzzle of a revolver.

The three human thunderbolts had resolved to go back there—to kill!

It was night again when these figures, human

from their outlines, glided across the public plaza of the New Mexican town, and peeped into or listened at the various monte and peco dens, where the citizens of San Topeto were enjoying themselves at the rough, greasy tables.

These three men were evidently Mexican ranchmen from their appearance; they wore the laced sombrero of the well-to-do horse-owner, the wide pantaloons of the Mexican gentleman, and looked for all the world like men who had a large amount of gold to stake on the turn of a card.

The plaza seemed deserted, as if all the denizens of Bed-Rock, excepting those who gambled, kept early hours, and had retired.

The three glided like specters—well armed specters, though—from den to den.

In front of one at last they stopped, as if a voice on the inside, possessed a familiar sound.

It was San Topeto's best patronized resort.

Thither night after night came the town's most prominent citizens, and until the break of another day they sat there and played like reckless men.

"We've tracked 'im down, boys!" whispered one of the three, and in they went.

Their entrance produced more than a momentary sensation.

The dark-faced gamblers looked up and saw three well-dressed Mexican ranchers, who had evidently come to the place for the purpose of having a jolly time, and of getting rid of a lot of surplus wealth.

They walked straight to the counter in one corner of the room, which was presided over by a veritable genius of the bottle, and gulped down three drinks of the "best p'izen" the haunt could furnish.

At the entrance of the three, room was mechanically made for them at half a dozen tables.

All knew how boldly the rich stockowners bet, and the gamblers of San Topeto were eager to get a pull at their purses.

"I see my table—keep close to it," whispered one of the three to his companions, and leading them across the room, he seated himself on a bench that ran the length of one of the tables.

"I am Senor Jose, senors," he said, by way of introduction to the party at the table.

"That's all hunky," laughed the giant, broad-shouldered gambler, who eyed the Mexican from under the lead-colored brim of a sombrero. "Senor Jose, we welcome you to our table, an', by Jovel I hope you bring luck ov some kind with you. Just got in, eh?"

And the bronzed hand of the speaker shuffled the dirty cards.

"We have just arrived from Taos," said Senor Jose. "I go back to the *rancha* almost cattleless."

How the eyes of the gamblers shone at this rather unguarded announcement!

In eight words the new-comer had told that he was well-heeled, and he seemed to show, moreover, that the last drink at the bar just left had proved one too many; it had loosened his tongue when that unruly member should have been well guarded.

The companions of Senor Jose stood near the table, having refused several offers to take part

in monte games near by, and with folded arms prepared to watch their comrade's fortune.

"I play for all, senors," said Jose, with a glance around the nearest tables. "Senors Pablo and Pata will let me lose or win for all."

"Then, play like Jehu, senor," said the sombreroed giant. "I am Cyclone Taos at yer service, an' as you've just got in from the town whar I won my rep, I may be able ter fasten on some of ther yeller shiners I used ter handle thar!"

The game began and was soon in full blast.

Senor Jose, although backed by an unlimited amount of recently acquired wealth, played cautiously at first, but after a while and under the influence of the bartender's villainous compounds, he became reckless, and lost without concern, much to the gratification of his antagonists.

His arrival had brought fortune to the table, but fortune for Cyclone Taos and his companions.

"Senor Jose, ther goddess hez desarted ye fer a spell!" laughed Cyclone with eyes and lips at the same time. "I've been thar myself, pard, but I always fetched her back by stickin to ther paste-boards. How war trade at Taos?"

"Pretty brisk, senor," said Jose meekly.

"Nobody inquired arter me?"

"No."

"They used ter want me thar; mebbe they do yet."

"Hezn't thet committee been discharged yet, Cyclone?" laughed one of the bronzed gambler's pards.

"Kinder guess not."

"An' it war organized fer ten minutes' work, too. Thet war ther night 'Frisco Frank settled with time."

"Bet yer life it war. Hyar's a queen fer you, Senor Jose. What's yer stake?"

The handful of gold which Senor Jose threw on the table at that moment had a ring which attracted the attention of gamblers some distance from the spot.

"We've got you now, Senor Jose," said Cyclone Taos under his breath. "You'll hev ter go ter raisin' hoofs an' horns ag'in arter to-night. Pepe's last decoction war too much fer ye."

The cards were dealt and played amid much excitement, and Senor Jose's gold passed across the table into Cyclone's purse.

"Once more, senor," he said. "The last stake brings the fickle goddess back."

But Senor Jose made no reply.

"Not cleaned out already, an' just from Taos?" cried Cyclone. "Look hyar, old fellar, this is a scrub game we've been playin'. Now let's go ter work in earnest. Shuffle thar, Sleek Ben. He's not goin' ter quit now. Hyar, Pepe, trot this way with a tray ov yer coldest p'isen!"

The demands of play seemed resistless, and Senor Jose, with a glance at his companions, ran a yellow hand beneath his embroidered jacket.

"Make the stake big, Senor Cyclone," he said in the voice of a person determined to win or lose everything on one throw. "Down with your ante. Make it a good pile, senor."

"Won't I, though, Pard Jose? Hyar goes fer

ther biggest ante ever thrown in Bed-Rock. Don't ferget, my cattle seraph, thet I'm Cyclone Taos ov sacred memory in more'n one town west ov ther Rio Grandel!"

The gold that fell from Cyclone's hand was no inconsiderable amount.

It brought exclamations of astonishment from more than one pair of lips, and riveted many eyes on the man just from Taos.

Senor Jose's eyes seemed to twinkle at sight of the hillock of eagles, which Cyclone Taos had deposited on the board.

"What's yer bet, senor?" cried Cyclone, leaning across the table with the insulting air of a victorious gambler, and shooting his words squarely into the Mexican's teeth. "Bet lively. Make thet ante ov mine ashamed ov itself if ye dare."

"I can do that, senor!" and the hand of Senor Jose once more sought the inside of his jacket.

It reappeared like a flash, and the next moment there fell upon the gold a ten-inch bowie whose blade was dimmed by dark blood-stains! Cyclone Taos looked at it for a moment, and then glanced at Senor Jose.

"What's that?" he yelled.

"My bet, senor," was the cool reply.

"Thet's my knife!"

"I know it. I found it where you left it—in the heart of the best man thet ever crossed the river—Rio Rob!"

"Then you ar'—"

"Cap'n Dick!"

A dozen men sprung up at the same moment; as many revolvers clicked.

"Then, Cap'n Dick, you lose both life an' gold!" thundered Cyclone Taos.

"Not yet, Cyclone!"

These words were spoken as with one tongue by the two men who, as Senor Jose's companions, had watched the game in silence.

The next second their yellow hands seized Cyclone's arms and kept his revolvers down.

"We're hyer for vengeance," grated the unmasked Texan as he leaned across the table toward the pinioned sport. "We're hyer ter avenge Rio Rob. I knowed yer knife ther minute I saw it. Look inter this revolver a second an' then—die!"

Cyclone Taos struggled, but the Texans were giants also.

The revolver of "Senor Jose" was at his head.

"To ther rescue, pards!"

"Yes, ter Cyclone's funeral, men ov Bed-Rock!" responded Captain Dick, and from the terrible report that supplemented the last sentence a giant, with a horrible hole in his face, reeled ten feet away.

The shot had not died away ere Captain Dick wheeled upon the horrified crowd with two revolvers.

"Rake in ther stakes, Scott," he said to one of his followers, and a stained hand transferred the gold to the capacious pocket of the desperado.

Then the three pards backed toward the door with six revolvers glaring into the faces of the men of San Topeto.

"We came like lambs, willin' ter be sheared, but we go off like lions," laughed Captain Dick,

"The Terrible Six may henceforth be known ez the Three Thunderbolts from Hangin' Rock! Waltz up to the bar, lizards, an' nominate yer p'isen. Waltz! Ther first man what holds back, follers Cyclone Taos ter kingdom come."

The alacrity with which some men accept a treat often creates a smile.

Never before that hour had a citizen of Bed-Rock been known to refuse a free drink, and even when menaced by the most merciless revolvers in the Territory, they were not likely to refuse a glass of whisky.

There was a general movement toward the bar.

We might say that it was rather precipitous on the part of some.

But more than one eye glanced at the stiffening corpse on the floor as their owners avoided it.

This was the man who was to prove that Cool Sam lied when he said that he would come back to Bed-Rock and stand treat for the whole town.

He would never do it now.

Well, the whole crowd reached the bar, still covered by the revolvers of the self-styled Thunderbolts of Hanging Rock.

Pepe, the most thoroughly frightened man in the house, set out the liquor.

Fifty hands encircled the heavy glasses and then the voice of Captain Dick rung out again:

"Drink to the health ov ther Three Thunderbolts! Down with yer strychnine, scrubs ov Bed-Rock!"

That toast was downed amid whispered oaths, and three men stepped across the threshold of the Gamblers' Paradise.

Silence succeeded for a moment, and then there was a howling time in the saloon.

CHAPTER XIV.

COOL SAM ON DECK.

THE desperate galoots of San Topeto filled the air with shouts of the direst vengeance.

Some sprung to the door, while others gathered around the bloody shape stretched on the floor.

Nobody went back to the interrupted games.

In a few minutes swarthy men like those already on the inside poured into the monte den; they had heard the deadly shot, and the revengeful cries, and came to see what had happened.

When questioned, they said they had seen nobody on the plaza; the disguised Texans had invaded Bed-Rock like thieves in the night, and not one of its citizens could say in what direction they had gone.

While Cyclone Taos had not been a great favorite in Bed-Rock, he was a prominent and, to some extent, a representative citizen.

At any rate, his death called forth an impromptu indignation meeting, and everybody resolved that the Thunderbolts ought to be hunted down without ceremony.

Meanwhile, Captain Dick and his pards had crossed the plaza and quickly mounted their horses just beyond the old Apache wall.

The flashes of triumph that lit up the cap-

tain's eyes did not abate in the least as he galloped away, leaving Bed-Rock and its indignant citizens behind him.

He and his pards still wore the garments which had completely hoodwinked the San Topetans; and they did not stop to wash the stain from their faces.

"I hate a Mexican like Satan hates holy water, but I'll be hanged ef thet Senor Jose bizness warn't a good gag," laughed Captain Dick. "We couldn't play it ag'in back thar. What say ye, pards?"

The two comrades laughed heartily over Captain Dick's remarks.

"We'll go back some time, but not ez ranchers just from Taos," they said. "Which way now, cap'n?"

"To Cool Sam's trail."

"Which takes us to ther mountains?"

"Sart'inly."

Side by side across the plain that stretched westward from the scene of their last exploit rode the Three Thunderbolts from Hanging Rock.

All at once Captain Dick drew rein and clutched the arm of his nearest comrade.

"We forgot suthin'," he said.

"I guess not, cap'n."

"Yes, but we did. We went to Bed-Rock to find two men; we found but one."

"Who did we miss?"

"The skunk that told Cool Sam that his girl pard war ter be found under ther hangin' stone."

"Wal; what ov it?"

"It amounts ter this: I hate that man as well as I hated Cyclone Taos."

"We'll see 'im later."

Captain Dick did not reply, but turned his face toward Bed-Rock whose lights had long since disappeared.

"Fer God's sake, don't let ther cap'n drag us back ter thet lizard's den, Scott," whispered one of the comrades at the ear of the other. "He's makin' up his mind ter go back. Woe ter every mother's son ov us ef we foller him thither."

That was enough; Scott was already talking.

"We'll see thet kid later, I say, cap'n," he said. "Cool Sam an' his pard demand our attention now. Attend ter them first; arter thet we'll—"

"You go an' find Cool Sam," was the interruption. "I haven't asked you to go back ter San Topeto. It wouldn't do for all three ov us ter go back thar together. I'm goin' back!"

"Cap'n—"

"I settle with ther kid what posted Cool Sam! I know him from what I remember ov our last few days in the town. I kin lay my hands on him without ther least trouble. The feller we caught asleep one night back thar war no fool. Dictionary Davy, yer l'arnin' shall seal yer doom!"

"Good-by, then, cap'n," said the two Texans, as they extended their bronzed bands.

"No monkeyin', pards. I'm not goin' back thar ter turn my boot-toes up ter ther stars. Meet me at the cavern when they go out. I'll be thar!"

The captain's pards turned away, their good-byes refused, and the next moment Captain

Dick himself sat alone on the plain with his resolute face turned toward the place where he had just shattered a human face.

The two Texans had reined in their steeds, and as they resumed their gallop toward the distant mountains, they could imagine Captain Dick riding with fire in his eyes back to the scene of his last wild exploit.

Suddenly, scarcely ten minutes after Scott's last utterance, there came clear and distinct from the dense shade of a clump of mesquite, a command not unusual along the trails of the Southwest border:

"Halt!"

The two Texans drew rein and revolvers at the same moment.

"None o' thet!" said the same voice which had spoken the brief command. "Ef ever I hed ther drop on two Texas pinks, I've got it on ye two. Throw up yer hands! Mebbe you recognize me by my voice. Ye've heard it afore."

Almost involuntarily the same name fell from two tongues:

"Cool Sam!"

"I should delight ter remark," was the response. "Cool Sam an' all alone, my fragrant galoots. I'm the galoot thet got five-minute orders in Bed-Rock a short time back, an' the identical individual yer cap'n, an' you, too, mebbe, wants ter see on bizness. Whar might yer pard be?"

The two Texans exchanged swift glances which did not escape Cool Sam's keen eyes.

"I prefer the truth ef it doesn't dislocate a jaw," he said. "I've heard ov men bein' killed fer lyin'. Yer cap'n I war askin' about."

"We've separated," said Scott, sententiously.

"Not fer good?"

"Perhaps."

"Now come; no taffy fer this pilgrim," said Cool Sam. "Men ov your stripe are only separated by death. They call you Scott," he went on, singling out one of the roughs. "I'll take a modicum ov truth from you. By the bones ov my departed mother-in-law! I'll give the stars a peep at ther interior ov yer brain-boxes if ye prevaricate!"

"Wal, then, you'll find Cap'n Dick whar you don't show yerself!" blurted Scott.

"Whar's thet?"

"In Bed-Rock!"

"What'll you bet?" cried Cool Sam. "I'm on my way thar now. So Cap'n Dick's gone back?"

"Thet's what I said."

"An' you, my yaller daisies?"

"We're goin' home."

"To the old cave, I s'pose. All right! You'll not find my little pard thar this time. Bet yer life I'm goin' ter Bed-Rock. I told 'em I'd come back an' stand treat fer ther hull set, includin' Cyclone Taos, though he doesn't fancy this pilgrim. Wal, I'm off. Farewell, pinks ov perfection. Keep yer peepers peeled among the hills. Thar's 'Pache fleas in nature's blanket."

At that moment a horse moved out from the mesquite shadows and carried the giant figure of Cool Sam past the two Texans.

Scott bade him good-night in no happy tones, and they saw him ride off.

"Cool ez a shadder!" hissed Alf.

"He's carryin' death toward Bed-Rock—death to Cap'n Dick!"

"But he drops whar he is!"

Hard upon the last words came a flash and a report, then a horse wheeled suddenly and came like a black thunderbolt through the night toward the astonished twain.

"My God! Scott, you missed!" exclaimed Alf.

"Snap shots don't always kill," said the man, who stood erect in his stirrups. "I'll do a little shootin' on my own account."

In vain did the last of the Terrible Six attempt to get the drop on the speaker; two revolvers spoke before theirs, and almost at the same moment two stalwart figures struck the ground with a dull thud!

Cool Sam halted between the pair and eyed them coolly for a moment.

"Two Texas primroses transplanted in New Mexico," he murmured.

Then he rode slowly away.

CHAPTER XV.

COOL SAM IN BED-ROCK.

NOBODY seemed to see the man who entered San Topeto on the west in the light of the stars, and with the noiseless tread of the mountain cat.

He did not court concealment, for he hurried toward the plaza with form erect, as if he were a privileged citizen of the border town.

It was not Captain Dick in a second disguise, but Cool Sam, the man left on the plain at the conclusion of the foregoing chapter.

"So Cap'n Dick is hyar," he said to himself. "Wal, I'd like ter meet thet Texas hollyhock."

Passing down one side of the plaza he halted at last before a small, adobe structure, to the door of which he applied his bronze knuckles in a series of raps.

In response to the knock, the portal was opened by some person on the inside, and a low exclamation of surprise greeted the border pard.

"You back?" continued the voice, as Cool Sam stepped unbidden across the threshold.

"You came too late to witness the tragedy."

"What tragedy, Davy?"

"The shooting of the Cyclone Taos. It wasn't fair—it was murder."

But who did it?

"Cap'n Dick."

"Thet's the man I want ter see," said Cool Sam. "If I am too late fer the shootin' matinee, I'm not too late to find him."

"But he is not here. He left with his pards immediately after the shooting."

"I know that. I found the two pards out on ther plain, an' I left 'em thar. Cap'n Dick is somewhar in Bed-Rock."

Dictionary Davy, a good-looking young man of twenty, started visibly at Cool Sam's assertion.

"It can't be, Sam!" he said, incredulously. "After what he did to-night—after the oaths against him, he wouldn't come back here."

"Wal, he rode back anyhow, an' I'm hyer ter interview him."

The young man did not speak; he seemed astonished.

"Fact it is, Davy, fer I b'lieve ther pards didn't lie," persisted Cool Sam. "Before I go

further, I want ter thank you fer tellin' me whar I'd find Reta. I found her thar, an' best ov all we picked up the Infant in the end, an' got away from Gold Belt's 'Paches. Yer hand fer yer help, boy," and Cool Sam held out his hand for Davy's, which he got.

"Davy," he went on, "mebbe you'd like to know why I want ter interview Cap'n Dick. It ain't because he's the last ov the Terrible Six. Thet's not my bizness. Since I've met Roy, er the Infant, ez I call 'im, because he war a baby when I saw 'im last, I hev learned suthin' which I mor'n half suspected. Roy's father an' I war pards. It war a long time ago, but he hed a home while I war a prairie roamer. One night he war found shot, an' his baby boy Roy stolen. We saddled both crimes onto 'Paches, fer an Injun trail led from the house. Didn't I foller that trail though? Fer day's an' days Sam Simpson hunted fer Roy Robsart with a rifle always cocked fer ther bosoms ov the red snakes what hed him. Wal, I never found the Infant. Thet war left fer my little girl pard, who hed been betrothed to Roy in his cradle by two fathers who war friends."

"Not until a few hours ago did I meet Roy, an' then a mystery ov many years ago war cleared up. He told me then what the 'Paches told him many times. They did steal him just ez we always thought, but the night they went to the ranch to do the job they found his father lying dead before the house. Somebody hed been thar before the Injuns, an' he wusn't red, either. A white man, Davy! Them Injuns always had an idea who'd beat 'em to ther house, an' by puttin' this an' thet together, I've got it solid on ther right man. A man can fasten a crime on the guilty hound ef he ain't a detective. I'm cool when it comes ter thinkin', ef I do splurge 'round a bar sometimes. Davy, the man what got ahead ov the 'Paches thet night rode toward Bed-Rock a while ago. Men call him Cap'n Dick. Roy knows him now, an' I had hard work ter keep him back."

"Cool ez Cap'n Dick is, the boy'd be no match fer him. I left the young pair together in the mountains—Roy and Reta—an' I'm hyar on bizness. Ef Cap'n Dick is hyar, an' I b'lieve he is, I don't leave Bed-Rock till I've settled with him an' closed ther ledger. So he shot Cyclone, eh? I must hev r'iled thet individual when I left a message on his saddle."

"You transformed him into a crazy demon," said Davy. "He followed you at once. He penetrated Hanging Rock Cave too late to find you, but in time to meet with Rio Rob, in whose breast he left his bowie. That's why Cap'n Dick shot him to-night."

"I see!" exclaimed Cool Sam. "Now tell me all about the shootin' affair, but make it brief."

The youth proceeded at once, and gave Cool Sam an account of the tragedy already witnessed in the monte den.

It was told in a lucid manner, and with few words; in fact it was a narrative that enchained the single auditor's attention from first to last.

"Played the Senor Jose role, did he?" he said, when the boy had concluded. "Thet warn't his first appearance in thet part. Cap'n Dick's been thar afore, Davy. I recollect thet his two pards hed on ther disguises when I met 'em on the

plain. Senor Jose, eh? Wal, senor, I want you."

Cool Sam started toward the door of the house as he spoke the last word.

"I proceed ter interview Cap'n Dick," he said, with a smile.

"So will I."

"You, Davy?"

"Why not? Are we not friends?"

"Yes, but he didn't kill your pard."

"That is true, but I hate him all the same."

Cool Sam stopped short, and looked into the young man's face. There was determination there.

"Davy," he said, "let me go first. If I'm not back here in an hour, you kin go."

Dictionary Davy hesitated.

"I agree," he said at length. "I will wait an hour for you. Cap'n Dick does not wear his Mexican suit if he is in Bed-Rock, at the moment; you mustn't look for Senor Jose. Remember that."

"I'll not forget, Davy."

And the next moment the young man was the sole occupant of the cabin.

Cool Sam stepped from the house and straightened himself in the calm starlight.

"Now fer it, Cap'n Dick," he said. "We ar' in Bed-Rock together, an' the place is too small fer both of us. I know that you beat the 'Paches to a certain house years ago, an' to-night I don't want ter know anything else. Let him win to-night whose cause is just. Ef I don't go back to the children in the mountains, they'll know that Cap'n Dick won the last stake."

He glided away and was soon lost to the youth who watched his moving figure from the door of the house.

Hither and thither, among the buildings of Bed-Rock, flitted the figure of the border pard.

It was still the night made memorable by the swoop of the Texan Thunderbolts.

In one corner of a cabin, covered with a buffalo-robe, lay the disfigured corpse of Cyclone Taos.

Several monte dens had resumed operations, and by not a few San Topetans the thrilling visit to Captain Dick was already forgotten.

Cool Sam hunted well; he let no opportunity for observation escape him.

Every monte den was thoroughly inspected from the outside; the face and figure of each occupant was closely scrutinized.

"It's kinder queer," said Cool Sam at last. "Hev I got ter give it up fer a bad job? Mebbe ther Texan devil went somewhar else."

He paused, and then began to retrace his steps toward Dictionary Davy's shanty.

His hour was nearly up.

Without knocking, he pushed open the door and stumbled against something in the gloom.

A moment later, the border pard struck a match, and was holding it over the body of his friend!

"Is—that you—Sam?" gasped Davy.

"Bet yer life!" said the border pard. "Who's been hyar?"

"Thar war only one man ter come besides you."

"Cap'n Dick?"

"Yes."

"When war he hyar?"

"He—just—left."

Cool Sam rose, with his eyes fixed on the wounded man.

"Bet yer boots I'll find him, Davy!" he hissed.

CHAPTER XVI.

COOLNESS MEETS ITS MATCH.

It was, indeed, true that Captain Dick had "just left" the little cabin across whose uncouth floor lay Dictionary Davy, the young man who had revealed Reta's prison to Cool Sam.

"Go and hunt him, then!" said Davy, his voice a little stronger as he thought of the Texan who had come to the cabin and knifed him almost before he could lift a hand. "If I'm to pull through I'll be living when you come back, Sam; if not I'll be here anyhow. Never mind me. For my sake go and find that Texan tiger."

"Won't I, Davy?" cried Cool Sam. "An' won't I walk into him like a mule inter a bucket ov oats? Git a grip on life an' hold thar, boy. I won't be gone long."

"Only find him, Sam, that's all."

"Bet yer bottom dollar, Davy."

Once more Dictionary Davy was the only occupant of the cabin, and clinching his hands and gritting his teeth, he fell back to await results.

It was likely that Captain Dick, having accomplished his purpose, had left Bed-Rock.

He had returned for the express purpose, as the reader already knows of putting an end to the person who had given Cool Sam a bit of valuable information.

He had found that individual; had driven a bowie into his breast and left him for dead on the floor of his home, and could now rejoin the companions left on the plain.

Alas! he would find them dead, side by side, with their bronze faces upturned to the stars, and himself the sole survivor of the Terrible Six from Texas.

If he had tarried five minutes in the cabin of his second victim he would have encountered Cool Sam for we can safely say that that brief division of time had scarcely elapsed before the border pard put in an appearance.

If he had listened outside the cabin his keen ears might have caught the footsteps of his bitter foe.

He had discarded the rather flashy suit which had distinguished him as Senor Jose and now wore the garb of a horse-trader, as people of this character were continually arriving at and departing from San Topeto.

The horse traders of the Southwest come and go at their pleasure, spend their money freely, freely gamble, and are, upon the whole, a reckless, devil-may-care set.

Captain Dick had assumed the disguise best calculated to give him immunity from suspicion on his second visit to the town.

There might be a dozen traders in Bed-Rock that night; there might be none.

Calmly sheathing his bowie, he quietly crossed the plaza and entered a peco den that had resumed operations since his departure.

It was not the scene of his fatal encounter with Cyclone Taos, which den had been closed for the night.

This gambling-den was largely frequented by natives who were so immersed in their pastime that they did not notice the *soi disant* trader.

"Wouldn't you open yer peepers if ye knew me?" asked Captain Dick of himself as he glanced over the crowd. "Thar wouldn't be a Greaser left hyar in three minutes."

He walked forward and partook of the fiery liquid refreshments which were placed on the counter at his demand.

"Just got in," he observed to the bartender. "How's times?"

"Been kinder lively since sundown."

"What's happened; no shootin' matinee, I hope?"

"Only thet an' nothin' more. This time it war a boss citizen what got the summons."

"No."

"Cyclone Taos war ther pard what drew his pair ov wings. Shot by a man what played a reg'lar drop game. You've heard ov him—Cap'n Dick, ov Texas."

"Kinder acquainted with the pistol posy myself," observed the Texan. "We've got thet Texas rather foul ef he ever comes back. What'll you hev?"

Captain Dick did not refuse the treat proffered by the positive bartender; but filled the unwashed glass to the brim and drained it at a gulp.

"I guess I'll emigrate," he said. "Mebbe I'll run across the cap'n somewhar."

"Hope you will; but be keerful; he's a daisy with ther dropper."

How Captain Dick's eyes glistened!

He knew he could shoot.

His last words were compliments on himself, and with a salute with his bronze hand he left the den.

"Waitin' fer Cap'n Dick, eh, galoots ov Bed-Rock?" he chuckled, as he halted a few feet from the building, which he surveyed with a look of contempt. "One o' these days he'll come back just fer amusement, hang me ef he doesn't! I've got a notion ter stay over for ther public plant to-morrer. It will be a daisy time. Goin' ter burn Cyclone with big ceremonies, ho! ho! I dropped him without any. Whether I stay er not, I'll take a look at the corpse."

He walked rapidly toward a certain part of the New Mexican town rather remote from the pecco den and stopped in front of a small stuccoed building not unlike its numerous neighbors.

A swift glance on either side showed him nothing suspicious, and then in he went.

He shut the door behind him, but did not notice that almost directly after, it swung open, and remained wide enough to admit a man.

"Hyar ye ar' I suspect, Cyclone," he said, feeling over the ground with one hand. "I'm hyar ter see how much I sp'iled yer beauty a while back. Aha! hyar's yer buffler shroud. Now a match an' a partin' look."

The next moment the light of a lucifer shone like a fire-fly in the dense gloom, and Captain Dick pulled back a buffalo-robe and stooped over the form of his victim.

It was a weird tableau and one of short duration.

"How d'ye like his looks, cap'n?"

The last of the Texans sprung up as if a bomb had dropped at his feet.

Instead of dropping the match, now fairly ablaze he held it above his head and wheeled with a cry.

A man leaned coolly against the door frame. It was Cool Sam.

"Spoiled his beauty ferever, they tell me," continued the border pard, with tantalizing calmness. "I got ter Bed-Rock too late ter see the fun. But let me impart a bit ov information, cap'n. Davy ain't wiped out yet."

Captain Dick started.

"Thought yer had finished 'im, eh?"

"By heavens! I did!"

"Oh, pshaw! you can't drive a bowie worth a copper, cap'n. Just hold on to thet match a moment till I get fairly inside. Now!" and the door shut. "Throw down yer light, cap'n; we'll take it in the dark!"

Down went the match, revealing Cyclone's disfigured face as it fell, and in the gloom, scarcely ten feet apart, stood the two men with hands at the hilts of their border bowies.

For a moment not a sound rose on the pent-up air, but suddenly Cool Sam said:

"This is fer the Robsart killin' years ago, cap'n. Remember!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE END OF IT ALL.

If the border pard could have penetrated the gloom the moment he uttered his announcement, he might have seen Captain Dick recoil an inch or more.

A new light seemed to flash across the Texan's brain.

Cool Sam, then, was an avenger.

"Do you know, cap'n, thet ye'r' the last ov the Six?" continued the border pard. "Them two pinks you left on the plain a while ago, ar' lookin' at the stars with eyes thet can't count."

The answer was an oath in the darkness.

"Who did it?"

"Yer humble servant, Samuel Simpson," said Cool Sam. "I left 'em side by side, two Texas flowers bloomin' in New Mexico."

To this there was no response.

The captain of the Texans stood erect beside the corpse of Cyclone, holding in his hands revolver and bowie.

"I infer from yer silence thet ye'r' ready fer the tus-le, cap'n," observed Cool Sam.

"I'm ready. Sail in!"

Cool Sam threw one foot forward; at precisely the same moment Captain Dick executed a like movement.

The interior of the cabin was darkness itself; not a ray of light penetrated to the place, and in the dead silence a less courageous man than either of the two antagonists might have heard the throbings of his heart.

Suddenly Cool Sam's toe struck an obstruction.

It was Captain Dick's foot!

Instinctively the border pard drew off an inch and then saw a flash of fire.

"You can't shoot worth a copper, cap'n," he

chuckled derisively, when the bullet intended for him had buried itself in the heavy planking of the door. "I beg leave ter remark at this partic'lar juncture, thet I'm entirely bullet-proof."

"The devil you ar'!" grated Captain Dick. "What effect would a knife hev on ye?"

"Try it an' see!"

"Thet's what I'm goin' ter do. Look out, Cool Sam! In the last ov the Texans you've roused a tiger!"

"Good! Thet's the kind o' beast I delight ter tackle."

Did Cool Sam hear the enemy who glided toward him? Did he see the devilish face, the flashing eyes and the fiercely clutched bowie of Captain Dick?

All at once the Texan left the floor and darted at his enemy.

He seemed to have caught sight of Cool Sam's figure.

Whether he saw him or not, he did not miss the mark, for a moment later there was a collision.

Cool Sam was thrown back against the door before he recovered.

"I'm the last Thunderbolt, an' the most terrible ov the three!" hissed the Texan.

"I like thunderbolts," said Cool Sam, and just then his hand closed on a wrist which he knew was Captain Dick's.

"Now fer it," said the Texan. "Only one ov us walks from this shanty alive."

Then commenced a terrible battle for the mastery between the two men.

Cool Sam held the Texan's wrist despite his efforts to break the iron grip.

Ten minutes after Captain Dick's tigerish spring the door of the cabin was flung wide and a man came forth.

He walked through the starlight with an unsteady gait.

"I'm a movin' spectacle, I am," he said, in audible tones to himself, as he struck a bee-line for the plaza at that hour entirely deserted. "Thar's two ov 'em in thet shanty back thar, an' the galoots ov Bed-Rock kin plant one an' hang t'other to-morrer. What did I say I'd do when I left hyar last—treat ther crowd, eh? I'm goin' ter do it now!"

He reached the door of the largest monte den then in full swing despite the hour, and lifting the ponderous latch walked inside.

Forty men sprung up from the tables at sight of him.

"I'm no ghost, but flesh an' blood!" he exclaimed. "I've finished the bizness what fetched me ter this kentry. Galoots ov Bed-Rock, walk up an' choose yer p'isen."

He leaned against the rough bar and gave the horrified bartender a wink as he concluded.

The crowd held back aghast.

The man at the bar was not recognizable.

Who could he be?

"Don't know me, eh, my gentle pigeons?" he suddenly laughed. "I'm Cool Sam, an' I've just left Cap'n Dick!"

At mention of the Texan's name there was a movement toward the speaker.

"Set 'em up, cherub ov the bottle," he said to the bartender. "I wish all Bed-Rock war hyar. I'd treat ther hull town. Take yer death-sirup, galoots, an' don't ferget that whar ye left one dead man a while ago, I've just left another!"

Then he waved his hand toward the crowd, and moved from the den.

Nobody detained him, but a minute after his departure the crowd rushed out.

It surged across the plaza and entered Cyclone's shanty.

A look was enough, and the yells raised by the gang awakened every man, woman and child in San Topeto.

At the same time a man mounted a horse with difficulty just beyond the old Apache wall.

Wherever his hands fell there was blood; but what of that?

In his eyes were flashes of vengeance satisfied, and victory achieved.

Far from the scene of his last exploit, Cool Sam's steed stopped, and his bridle was caught eagerly by two young people who had rushed from a mountain cavern.

"Bowies war trumps when I played with Cap'n Dick, an' I won!" he said, looking down into Roy Robsart's eyes. "Thar's another chap I would like ter hev settled with—Carlo; but let him go. Children, it's the delight ov my life ter see ye united, an' I'm satisfied."

Dictionary Davy recovered from his wound, and lived to emigrate from Bed-Rock to a place where his talents made him a man of wealth and influence.

Cool Sam frequents the Southwest border, to which he returned, after having seen the boy chief of the Apaches restored to the old ranch.

Near by is another home in the midst of a thriving Texas farm, and it is said that its queen, a beautiful girl named Reta, is soon to become the wife of her neighbor.

THE END.

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